

The Sky Beyond the Walls

A Chinese Philosophy of the Way

Second Edition



牆外的天空

一種中國「道」哲學的詮釋

Antón Bousquet

The philosophical tradition of ancient China is both extremely rich and varied, offering mankind different visions of the universe, which complement the other traditions that arose in other lands and other eras. One of these is the “philosophy of the way,” which focuses on leading man to live in accordance with the “way of the sky,” which is the course of the heavens, the path taken by the flow of nature. Another, which has been heavily influenced by the first, is the Chinese Chan tradition, better known by its Japanese name: Zen. Both of these have often been associated with religion, either the religious “Daoism” that was derived from the work of the philosophers of the way or Buddhism, but far from myths and dogmas, religiosity and esotericism, their root represent natural philosophies, based on an experience of nature.

What the philosophy of way offers is a path of liberation from the things that stand between man and the whole of nature, that is, the all-encompassing sky. Things of the earth, the materials things that man accumulates, often enslave him. They form a wall that becomes a prison, and his life is devoted to its edification and protection. Things of the world, that is, the products of man’s mind, can also be part of this wall, leading him to think that the lens through which he sees nature represents nature itself. Finally, things of the sky, that is, the way he represents the essence of the whole of nature and being as “spiritual things” transcending his own experience: “gods,” “spirits,” or “Buddhas,” may lift man up and give him a better view of the whole of the sky, but they may also hide it from him. Man must therefore cease to hold on to these things to experience the truth of nature and embrace the way of the sky.

The present book represents a roadmap, based on the work of the philosophers of the way and the Chinese Chan tradition, meant to lead to an awareness of the nature of the yoke of things and liberation from it. Not meant to be a theoretical treatise on Eastern philosophy, it rather represents an invitation to a practice: a transformation of man’s relationship with the things that are part of his life and an experience of the way of the sky.

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Abbreviations

Ch. Chapter.
TBA. Translation by the author.

Introduction

Philosophy, the love of wisdom, represents the basis of every field investigated by the human mind. The quintessential questions linked to each one of these fields, from mathematics to biology or history, can be seen as philosophical ones. As the celestial vault encompasses all that is found in the sky and on the earth, so does philosophy encompass all human knowledge, the entirety of man's intellectual world. It both represents the deepest roots and the highest peaks of this world, which are not static and rigid, but continually changing and flexible, being permanently re-evaluated and improved, so that the image of the universe that they depict can be as faithful as possible.

Philosophy may encompass every other field of the mind, but it nonetheless does not form a single, unified entity. Philosophy is the concatenation of countless philosophies, belonging to different peoples, different cultures, or different eras, which may contradict each other. The confrontation of different philosophies allows the refining of each one of them, winnowing truth from falsehood, what elevates man from what brings him down. Some of them are "down to earth," loathing lofty intellectual musings that are seen as disconnecting man from the reality of his own experience of nature, while others aim at the stars, the highest of the skies, despising the lowly nature of man's life on earth to imagine another, more exalted one. One can learn from each one of them, without having to decide whether they are true or even merely good, and simply try to live by them to see where they lead their followers.

In the West, philosophy is now mostly associated with lofty pursuits, wars of words attempting to dissect nature with the knife of reason and logic, trying to pierce the secrets of the mind and the meaning of being through the use of language. This

can be explained by the tremendous influence of the two pillars of early Western philosophy: Plato and Aristotle, whose philosophies put a great emphasis on logical reasoning and discernment of truth from falsehood. Philosophy nonetheless did not begin with these two important figures: their Greek predecessors, the so-called Pre-Socratics, among which are Empedocles, Heraclitus, or Parmenides, had a radically different approach to what “wisdom” is. They did not feel the need to use technical language to analyze nature and did not see nature as a piece of machinery that could be explained simply using logic. They wrote poems depicting nature as they experienced it, not trying to strip it bare of its mystery, but rather embracing its mysterious essence as one of its most important qualities. This shows that what is now considered to be philosophy is only one particular type of philosophy, one that is more technical than it is poetic, and more theoretical than it is practical.

The rigidification of philosophy that occurred following the highly valuable but dangerous work of the two pillars of Western philosophy nevertheless always remained localized in the West. The East developed traditions that were spared by this phenomenon, among which is the Chinese one. China itself is the point of origin of various schools of philosophy, which often competed against one another. There is therefore no Chinese philosophy as such, but rather Chinese philosophies, with different methods and different goals. The present work will mainly explore one particular branch of the tree formed by the Chinese tradition: the “philosophy of the way,” which was first put into writing by the so-called early “Daoist philosophers,” that is, Laozi (老子), Zhuangzi (莊子), and Liezi (列子), who lived between the 5th and the 4th c. B.C. Another Chinese tradition, which arose long after the death of the aforementioned philosophers and is rooted in Indian Buddhism, will also be seen as an extension of the work of the philosophers of the way: the Chan (禪) tradition,¹ which flourished in China a millennium after the first philosophers of the way, under the impulse of the Indian monk Bodhidharma (達摩²).

Both the philosophy of the way and Chan present a sharp contrast with the intellectual pursuits forming the bulk of the Western

¹ The Chan (禪) tradition is more commonly known by its Japanese name: Zen.

² 【dámó】.

philosophical tradition. They are not a subject meant to be studied to understand the creation, but rather are a guide to a spiritual practice, a path carved in language and action, meant to lead man toward a liberation, the accomplishment of his own nature as a living, human being. This practice is not limited to mental exercises: it is meant to transform every aspect of a man's life, as much what he does with his body as what he does with his mind, and to remain part of him at each instant. What it proposes to those who have accepted to follow its guidance is a transformation of their own being, so that their life would be lived in harmony with the flow of nature. It corresponds to a certain vision of a natural order of the universe, one which has thus been described by the first Chinese philosopher of the way:

人法地，
地法天，
天法道，
道法自然。

“Man takes his law from the earth;
The earth takes its law from the sky;
The sky takes its law from the way.
The law of the way is its being what it is.”³

This vision of the order of nature is both simple and based on the experience that man can have of what surrounds him, rather than dogmas. It may even appear obvious, once a key term has been defined: the way, which is the course taken by the whole of the sky and all that it encompasses, through time and space, as a totality forming nature itself. Out of this apparent simplicity, a rich philosophy may nonetheless emerge, one that can lead man to a greater proximity with the order of nature. An awareness of the natural hierarchy formed by each one of the elements that are mentioned can indeed by itself lead to a transformation of the relationship that man has with them, including with himself. The relationship between man, the earth, the sky, and the way is not

³ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄. 《新积漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》. 明治書院, 1966. P. 52. English translation is based on the one found in: Lao Tzu. *The Tao Teh Ching*. Trans. by James Legge, Grange books limited, 2001. np. but modified to better fit the present work (Ch. 25).

one of equality but rather one of harmonious subjection, with some of these elements being enclosed in larger ones, like Russian dolls.

The description of the order of nature given by the Chinese philosopher begins with man himself, who represents the lowest element, the smallest of the Russian dolls, found in the innermost part. Man is ruled by the earth, out of which his flesh made of water, minerals, and organic compounds was formed, and which keeps him close to its surface by its gravitational pull. He comes from it, is nourished by its fruits, and one day will be reclaimed by it. He begins his life as a son of the earth, creeping upon its skin, but man is not a lone creature: together with his brethren and ancestors, he forms *mankind*, something that is more than the sum of the individuals composing it.

Man is ruled by the earth, but mankind also can profoundly affect its surface, shaping it according to the will of men, within boundaries set by nature itself. Mankind can create things out of the earth, but the minds of men have also opened up a whole new realm that stands upon an earthly foundation: things of the mind, things that have an earthly, physical foundation but that nonetheless stand out of the earth, into another realm: the metaphysical. An example of such things are words, which are based upon an earthly basis, linked to the senses, such as a sound wave produced when they are pronounced or letters painted with ink on paper, but also mean something that is not found on the earth itself, but only in man's mind, as a metaphysical thing.

What is formed by the concatenation of the collective, metaphysical knowledge accumulated by mankind, with all the physical products of their hands on the earth and the lens through which they see the continuum formed by nature as an assembly of discrete things is man's *world*. His world is what stands in contrast with nature itself, and goes against its flow. It is the realm built from the ground up by mankind upon the face of the earth, harmoniously and seamlessly mixing the physical with the metaphysical. It is the cities standing against the open-country where nature reigns supreme and no trace of the work of man's hands and mind can be seen.

More than man himself, it is therefore his entire world that is ruled by the earth. The earth, in turn, is nonetheless also ruled by another realm, one that encompasses both the earth and man's

world: the sky. The sky represents something more than the expanse found above the earth and man's world. It is not only the celestial vault, the blue background upon which the sun shines during the day and myriads of stars are displayed during the night. The sky is the expanse itself, the space in which all things can *be* and the time across which all these things are carried. It is therefore not a mere counterpart to the earth, something facing it as two men of equal stature encountering each other. The sky encloses all the things that *are*: the celestial bodies, the earth, man and his world, and the whole of life. The earth therefore rests upon the sky and not the other way around. It represents the whole of what can be experienced by man through his senses: all that he can touch, see, hear, smell, or taste is carried within the arms of the sky, forming a totality that is only split into countless distinct things by man's world and his mind, as he needs contrasts and oppositions between things in order to make sense of the whole of the creation.

The sky may be the grandest thing that man can experience directly with his senses, but it itself also follows a law: the way (道 **【dào】**). The way does not represent a mysterious entity controlling the sky and all that it contains, a puppetmaster of the universe. It rather simply designates the course of the sky, the path that it takes, as it continuously evolves and changes. If the sky were to be seen as a marble, the way would be the track upon which it runs rather than a hand pushing it around. The way is the path followed by the flow of nature, but this flow is not like a glass marble, solid and round. It rather resembles a stream of water running down a valley, always taking the easiest course rather than the most direct one.

The sky and the earth naturally follow the way, which follows itself and is ruled by itself. The only thing that may disturb the flow of nature is the one first mentioned by the Chinese philosopher, the smallest of the Russian dolls in the order of the creation: man. Mankind and his world are the only "artificial" things found upon the earth or in the sky, things that stand out from the rest of nature. His cities can be distinguished immediately from the open-country, as in the former the imprint of man's hands and mind is omnipresent, whereas it is absent of the latter. Ants and termites also build cities that allow them to survive in large colonies, but contrary to man, they do so without a will to oppose and con-

quer nature, and they only create things that they need for their survival, whereas man's appetite for domination of nature and inflation of his own ego is largely boundless. His consciousness, however, also allows him to make a choice: he can oppose nature but also accompany it. He can strive against the flow, but he can also let himself be carried by it or follow it.

The very title of the main work of the first Chinese philosopher of the way presents us the essence of the path that man is to follow: *The Treatise on the Way and Virtue* (道德經⁴). The way of the sky (天道⁵) is the course followed by nature, and it would seem that man is invited by nature itself to cultivate his *virtue* (德⁶), that is, the qualities allowing him to live in accordance with the way rather than in opposition to it. His own nature, his instincts, make him something that stands out of the flow, but this same nature also seems to call him to transcend these instincts and to accomplish himself by consciously choosing to embrace the course of the sky, the way. The cultivation of this virtue does not involve the acceptance of any dogma, or the following of series of rules handed over through tradition. It is cultivated through a practice, derived from a direct observation of the course of nature, and while a tradition can emerge from the collective knowledge derived from observations and practice, it should always be continuously reevaluated so that it would always reflect the truth of the course of the sky. The philosophy of the way is therefore not a religion, but rather a natural philosophy and a way of life. It should not be confused with the religion that arose long after the death of the first philosophers of the way: the so-called "Daoist" religion. The house of the way (道家), a philosophical school, has been turned into a temple or a church, based on religious dogmas, teachings about gods and spirits, superstitions, and esotericism, which have little in common with the original philosophy of the way and are more focused on worldly constructions, products of man's imagination, than on the direct observation and experience of the course of nature.

The degeneracy of the philosophy of the way into a religion represents a good example of the process that leads man to stray from the way, and even to be obstinate in his opposition to the

⁴ 【dào dé jīng】 .

⁵ 【tiān dào】 .

⁶ 【dé】 .

flow of nature. This process is not limited to this philosophy, to philosophy in general, or even to other kinds of intellectual pursuits. It is not limited to the things of the world, but also affects man's relationship with those of the earth and those of the sky, that is, respectively, material and spiritual matters. To understand this process, one must first see the essence of "things," and perceive what role they play in man's life.

Things of the world, such as concepts, words, languages, or philosophies, first arose as ways to divide the whole formed by the earth and the sky into bits of meaning that could be put in relation with one another, contrasted and opposed, in order to "make sense" of the sensory inputs received by the nervous system. A rudimentary world is indeed not the sole possession of man: many animals are also able to distinguish parts of the whole of nature as independent "things," which are identified and classified in different categories inside this world, such as food, potential mates, or predators. Articulated language is nonetheless man's privilege, and it allows him to build up his world to a considerable height and width, far larger and more complex than the one of any other creatures. This power is nonetheless double-edged. It can help man understand the nature of the sky and of all that it contains, to make sense of his sensory experience of nature, but it can just as well sever his bond with it. Indeed, if he ends up edifying the world as an end in itself rather than as a means to live in harmony with nature, to strengthen his link with the way of the sky, he will progressively enclose himself in his own construction, becoming a prisoner of the work of his hands.

No matter whether the things that man accumulates belong to the earth, the world, or the sky, the result of a lack of vision of the original purpose of things in man's life, the reason why his kind began to make use of them, is the same: the higher is this pile of things surrounding him, the smaller will his horizon of what lies beyond them be. Building up high walls made up of a myriad of things, he will lose sight of the sky itself, and will only see nature through the lens of these things. Enclosed within these walls, all his experiences of nature will be mediated by these things, which he will see as forming a home, a shelter protecting him from what lies beyond: the open-country, nature without the imprint of man, the great sky and its forces that reign upon all things.

Man finds comfort with the things of the earth, material objects, first because they give him a sense of security. Holding on to food, gold, or clothes that he owns, he is confident in his chances of survival. His fear of death, of the end of his own being, will be appeased. The things of the world allow him to grasp the whole of nature, to make him feel that he understands it and can exert a power over it. Manipulating concepts, words, and bits of meaning representing what is around him as well as what he can imagine, he feels empowered, a master of his world. Finally, the things of the sky represent the parts of the world allowing him to make sense of the essence of the sky and of its course, what he considers to be the source and nature of the being of the creation: the “gods,” the “spirits,” the “buddhas,” the “cycle of reincarnation.” These things give meaning and purpose to his life, make him feel that the whole in which his life takes place is ruled by a form of order and meaning, and that he can grasp the nature of this order through the study of these things, or simply by putting his trust in them.

In each one of these three cases, man holds on to things belonging to a different realm: the earth, the world, or the sky, either driven by fear, his will to inflate his ego, or by a lust for power. Doing so, these things cease to fulfill their original purpose: to be pedestals helping man to prolong his days on earth or to make sense of the nature of the sky and its course, and they instead become a prison, whose walls cut man off from the truth of the sky.

As it is the case with the degeneracy of the philosophy of the way into a dogmatic religion, the man deprived of a direct experience of the truth of the sky or one who is frustrated by his inability to perceive its order and truth may then decide to embrace the fantasies found inside his world, as they would offer him precise and definite answers to the mystery of the essence of the sky. Unwilling or unable to experience the truth of the sky, which always slips away as one attempts to grasp it with his mind, he finds solace in falsehood, which can be grasped tightly and held on to, giving him a sense of security, stability, and purpose.

A man holding on to things is like an infant holding on to his mother’s breasts, even after he is satiated. He is also like a young child who manipulates the objects that are found in his vicinity

but is completely oblivious to the “big picture” of his existence. He does not realize that the walls that offer him a sense of security and power are imprisoning him, keeping him away from the freedom that he could enjoy in the open-country found beyond them. More than simply hiding the sky away from him, the things forming these walls are also keeping him in chains. The things of the earth that he possesses also possess him: he becomes a slave to his possessions, as he needs to protect them, to care for them, and he lives in fear of their disappearance. The things of the world that lead him to believe that he can grasp all the things found in the creation are the ones that are in control, as by seeing the creation through them, through the walls of his prison, he only holds power over representations found inside his world rather than over what they truly represent, whereas these things are able to restrict his horizon, and the same goes with the things of the sky.

When man lets himself be imprisoned by his things rather than use them as a pedestal allowing him to prolong his life on earth or better observe the truth of the sky; when he becomes a servant of things instead of their user, his life is the one of a caterpillar that would be stuck at this stage of its development, ignorant of the fact that it does not belong to the earth but rather is meant to become a creature able to soar into the highest skies: a butterfly. The walls around him, composed of countless things to which he holds on to, prevent his transformation, the reaching of his true nature. His ego and his world allow him to stand out from the flow of nature, but instead of using them to get a better look at the nature of this flow before plunging into it, he puffs up his ego and builds up his world so that it would bring him farther and farther away from nature. Instead of perceiving the fact that his privileged position among the creation could allow him to become a friend of the sky, a being that would consciously embrace nature and accompany its flow, he tries to construct something that would stand against it. His ambition, consciously or not, is to become an opponent to the flow of nature, something not only standing out of it but standing against it. He fights the flow with his ego as a foolish warrior slashing the ocean with a sharpened blade. He threatens the stars with his fist, thinking of himself and of his world as a strong tree in the middle of a violent torrent, resisting it, neither bending nor breaking. But this is only an illusion, a dream painted by his imagination on the walls of his world, without any

basis in the reality of the earth and the sky.

The opponent to the course of the sky, the man striving against the way, thinks he holds the creation on a leash because of his bond with the things that he possesses, which may either belong to the earth, life, the world, or the sky, but he fails to realize that he is the one who is kept on a leash by his things. They weigh down his neck and prevent him from raising up his eyes to contemplate the truth of the sky. His condition is nevertheless not ineluctable or everlasting. A slave may be granted or find freedom. A yoke can be taken off someone's neck. The first step toward such liberation from the yoke of things is an awareness of one's condition as a slave. It may come naturally, as a result of one's course of life, but it may also be caused by an encounter with someone who has already been freed from things, has ventured beyond the walls and discovered the truth of the sky. Such travelers, free men, are those who built up the traditions that are meant to lead the slaves out of bondage, to guide the prisoners beyond the walls, men like the aforementioned philosophers of the way. Following their guidance, anyone may find the way out of these walls, and become of man of the way, someone living in accordance with the flow of nature instead of opposing it.

The path of liberation from the yoke of things nonetheless does not involve their abandonment, or their rejection. The things of the earth are necessary in order for man to continue to live above the surface of the earth: he needs food, shelter, clothes, or his flesh will swiftly be reclaimed by the soil from which it came. Without the things of the world, he would not be able to make sense of the whole of the creation. He would not be able to distinguish fruits from stones, family from strangers, or a firefly from the sun. Communication would be impossible, and no collective knowledge could emerge and be passed on from generation to generation. Finally, in the absence of any things of the sky, man would not be able to find any purpose to his own being and to the being of all beings. No matter to which realm they belong, the problem posed by the yoke of things does not come from the existence of the things themselves. They can help man find freedom as efficiently as they can enslave him. The problem is rather the perversion of man's relationship with these things.

Things are meant to serve man, but man is not meant to

serve things. The things of the earth are meant to ensure man's survival on the earth. The things of the world are meant to allow him to make sense of his sensory experience of the earth and the sky, whereas the things of the sky are meant to help him see his place in the whole of the sky and to live in accordance with the way. When he loses sight of this purpose, these things become ends in themselves. He then accumulates them, possesses them, because they make him feel empowered and puff up his ego. When he ceases to let them go when they have fulfilled their purpose, this is when he begins to be enslaved by the things around him. Holding on to them, he grows more and more attached, and is progressively chained to them. He accumulates far more things of the earth than he needs, attracts the jealousy of the needy, and then lives in fear and worry of losing them. He grasps things of the world, and begins to grow oblivious to the fact that they are mere images of the truth of the earth and the sky. He thinks that the power he holds over these images means that he exerts a power over the whole of the creation. He begins to worship or blindly put his trust in things of the sky without putting them in relation with a personal experience of the sky, once again mistaking a representation for what it represents, and therefore serves things instead of using them to get closer to the truth of the sky and to embrace the way.

Once a man imprisoned within the walls has become aware of the nature of the yoke of things, he may then begin to examine his chains, trying to understand the power that they exert over him. The things of the world handed over for millennia by the philosophers of the way may then show their usefulness: this tradition can teach him the nature of the yoke of things, and explain to him what he should do to free himself from it. His relationship with things should change. He should use the things of the earth and swiftly let them go rather than possess and grow attached to them. He should not try to grasp the things of the world and those of the sky too tightly, but rather release them and observe them at a distance, looking at the earth and the sky through them but letting the image they offer remain somewhat blurry, without sharp contours, so that he would keep in mind the fact that they are only representation of the truth of the earth and the sky. By releasing all things, he can begin to play with them rather than to be in a master-slave relationship with them, and thereby free

himself from his chains while using this form of playing with things to help him find the way out of the walls.

The path toward liberation is therefore not a path leading away from things, but rather one where things are transformed from enemies to friends, from hindrance to help. The journey upon this path involves the release of the things belonging to the three realms, and the present work will present some of the milestones found on this path, left by the Chinese philosophers of the way and the followers of the Chinese Chan tradition, in three different chapters: the first concerning the release of the things of the earth, then the second for those of the world, and finally the last one concerning the things of the sky. This roadmap of the journey leading beyond the walls; leading to a direct experience of the truth of the sky beyond them, will present a sharp contrast with other similar works concerning the Chinese philosophical and spiritual tradition. Indeed, even though it will attempt to faithfully depict this tradition, it will also present it in a rather personal way, examining this ancient tradition with a point of view that will not necessarily follow the terminology or the methods that are commonly associated with it. What it proposes is not a scientific overview of this tradition, nor an exposition of its origin, development, or even of its essence. It rather only represents an invitation to a practice, rooted in the Chinese philosophical tradition, but not following it exclusively; a practice of the release of the things that prevent us from experiencing the truth of nature, the course of the sky, and from finding our place in it. Its content would therefore be vain if it is read without the will to walk on the path. A roadmap is indeed meaningless if one does not use it to see where it leads, with his own eyes.

Chapter 1

The Things of the Earth

1.1 The Earth

Nothing is as familiar to us than the earth, understood in a wide sense of the word: not only as the soil under our feet, or the celestial body on which we are carried throughout the universe, but rather as matter itself, what we feel with our sense of touch, and what forms our very flesh and blood. As infants coming out of the motherly womb, we feel the touch of the midwife before we open our eyes and see the splendor of the sun. We feel the embrace of our parents before we can behold the plain beauty of the heavens. The contact with matter, with the earth, is what we experience first, but it is also something so familiar that it becomes ignored and misunderstood as we grow up in a world that is both built with the earth and that stands upon it. Therefore, before entering into the heart of the subject of the things of the earth, a few pages will be devoted to the examination of the nature of this element, this raw matter out of which we came and to which we shall soon return.

The wisdom of the first dwellers of the human world, a wisdom embedded and carried within languages themselves, can help us break the familiarity with the earth that blinds us to certain aspects of its nature. The Chinese world constitutes a particularly rich ore for this purpose, in particular due to the ideographic nature of its writing system. Etymologies of ancient European words indeed offer us series of insights concerning the way those who crafted them saw the world around them, but it is mostly through rather abstract links between concepts, associations between things that betray the nature of the culture from which they arose. In contrast with this, what ancient Chinese ideograms offer us are real images of the things that they depict, representations shaped by the human mind to model a part of the creation into a “thing,” a building block of the world taking the form of a rectangular shape inscribed on paper or carved on turtle shells or bones. Each one of these characters is a small and crude painting, which gives us an image of the way the person who created this miniature artwork saw the things around him.

The most commonly used ideogram designating the earth is: 地,¹ which is composed of two parts. The first, on the left, repre-

¹ 【地】.

sents the core meaning of the character, while the second is thought to be a phonetic guide showing how it was supposed to be pronounced using a basic, very commonly used and well-known character. The first part is the ideogram for the “soil,” 土,² originally depicting a lump of potter’s clay:³



Potter’s clay is a mix of dust and water, heavy but malleable, which can be shaped into various forms, becoming things that have their place in man’s world: vessels holding grains or liquids, statues that represent an artistic vision, or even tablets where words are carved so that they would pass through the ages. One of the core precepts of the philosophy of Laozi originated in the observation of natural elements, like clay and the earth itself: 曲則全, “what bends stays whole.”⁴ Clay lets itself be shaped by the potter’s hand, but even after it is fired in the kiln and deprived of its moisture, hardened and dried by the flames, it remains what it was, unscathed by the treatment it endured. Man tills the earth, carving it with blades of iron and stone tools, and in its humility, it lets itself be defaced by the sons who were birthed out of it. The earth does not need to resist us, because time works for it, and all the things that man takes and makes out of the earth will one day return to it, including man himself. The towers made of bricks will ineluctably crumble to the ground. The trenches will be flooded and filled back with mud, and then become graves for those who tired their bodies to plunder the source of their being.

Clay, and the dry land as a whole, nonetheless differ from water, which always bends, always yields when touched by creatures. It bends and yields when force is applied, but it is also firm and steady enough to provide support to things and living beings alike, allowing them to raise themselves above the face of the earth and

² 【tǔ】.

³ All the pictures of Old Chinese ideograms come from *hanziyuan.net*.

⁴ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新积漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 47. TBA (Ch. 22).

above the skin of the waters, to live a life bathed in the air of the heavens. If it is gently trodden, it offers a soft resistance that prevents feet and hoofs from being engulfed by the soil, but it ceases from resisting if one is brutal and insistent to pierce its surface. Man may benefit from imitating these properties of the earth, as it will later be seen.

The second part of the ideogram represents a snake: 也.⁵ The archaic form of the whole character better shows the resemblance with the animal (on the right side):



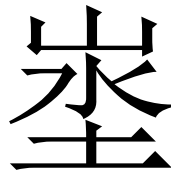
Even though this part of the ideogram is often considered to be a mere guide to pronounce it, its meaning nonetheless remarkably fits a depiction of the earth. The snake indeed certainly is one of the most universally recognizable creatures associated with the soil and its depths. Without limbs, it slithers upon the bare earth, its body fully in contact with the birth-giver of all life. It seeks chasms and voids on the face of the earth, which shelter it from the threatening presence of the servants of the skies: the birds of prey. The snake is nonetheless not only a creature close to the earth. It has also been endowed with the power to bring back to the earth most of the living beings roaming the dry land, regardless of their strength and size. Its bite is indeed often fatal to all, including man if not treated immediately. The serpent snatches the living beings to bring them under the ground, among the dead who were buried there by men fearful of the sight of putrefaction.

According to the Hebraic tradition, the snake was condemned to slither upon the earth as a punishment for leading the first couple to certain death, but this intimacy with the ground, seen by the book of Genesis as a humiliation, may also be seen under a different light. If man's hands are one of the main sources of his power over the earth and life itself, they also are the source

⁵ 【yě】.

of an impediment for spiritual maturity. Greed, attachment to material, earthly possessions, or thievery indeed begin with the hands firmly grasping what is coveted, not letting go so that things will not be taken by someone else or returned to the earth. One of the core insights of the Chinese Chan tradition is the advice to “refrain from being attached (to things)” (切勿執著), to cease from grasping and to let go, not only the things of the earth but all things, including those of the mind. Deprived of limbs, or perhaps blessed by their absence, the snake has been shaped by nature and offered a very peculiar relationship with the earth. Its body is as close to it as it can be, even sometimes living in its depths, the entirety of its elongated flesh in contact with the watery dust that forms the outermost crust of our planet, but it does not and cannot grasp a single handful of this soil. It does not attempt to possess it, to make it its own so as to prevent other living beings from enjoying its blessings and protection. Such interaction without possession, without attachment, is key to both the philosophy of the way and Chan. It is something extremely easy to learn, but something incredibly hard to fully put into practice. Following the hint left by the ancient Chinese word-artist who crafted the ideogram designating the earth, one may nonetheless observe the serpent and let it become a master, leading its followers to a more mature relationship with the earth and with nature as a whole.

This picture of the earth, based on the potter’s clay and the serpent, is nonetheless not the only one that has been preserved by the Chinese people. Other word-artists have left their imprint on turtle shells, bones, and paper, offering us complementary visions of the nature of the great body beneath our feet. Among these, one appears particularly interesting, as it can be linked with the larger scope of the present work:



This seldom used, alternate character for the word “earth”⁶ is a composition, using three more basic ideograms. From top to

⁶ 【dì】.

bottom: a mountain (山⁷), water (水⁸), and the soil (土⁹), the last of which has already been examined. The central theme of this picture is one that has caught the attention of a large number of Chinese painters: the mountain landscapes of the East Asian countryside. The heavy seasonal downpours of the region are the source of a multitude of waterfalls and mountain rivers flowing down to the lower ground while offering an image of splendid serenity and inviting contemplative souls to stand in awe of the beauty of nature.

The center of this picture, and the core of its substance, is the water flowing down from the top of the mountain and into the depths of the soil. It shows the earth as more than a motionless mass of dust supporting the world: it rather is shown as a dynamic landscape that includes the waters falling down from the clouds high above man's head and the mountains that surround his dwelling place. These clouds and the water filling them are part of the earth, extensions of it into the realm of the heavens, which for a few days wander in the air before they are brought down to their source.

Once again, this picture can teach us the essence of the course of nature, the *way* (道¹⁰), and the role that man is called to play in response to it, through the cultivation of his *virtue* (德¹¹), using the words of Laozi's treatise. The Chinese philosopher thus describes the nature of water:

上善若水。
 水善利萬物而不爭，處衆人之所惡，故幾於道。
 The highest excellence is like (that of) water.
 The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things,
 and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary),
 the low place which all men dislike.
 Hence it is near to (that of) the way.¹²

⁷ 【shān】.

⁸ 【shuǐ】.

⁹ 【tǔ】.

¹⁰ 【dào】.

¹¹ 【dé】.

¹² Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 23. English translation based on the one found in: Lao Tzu, *The Tao*

上善若水

Always yielding, it is nonetheless able to carve mountains and even the hardest stones. Building hidden temples in the heart of the earth in the form of subterranean caves passing through the ages sealed in darkness, the waters poured down from the heavens run toward their source, the abyss of the seas, always taking the humblest position and yet always triumphing over the forces opposing them, outlasting every single creature that attempts to subdue it. The *virtue* of water should be imitated by men wanting their life to be an echo to the course of nature, to the *way*.

Water is a source of life, but life itself also follows the same cycle. It comes out of the earth and is elevated above it, but ineluctably falls down and returns to the source from which it extracted itself. The earth forms a whole that strives to remain a single body. All things that have a mass are attracted to each other because of the gravitational force. The things of the earth, including the entire biomass that occupies the surface of the planet, are all equally pulled by the great body of the earth, as a mother embraces her children, holding them back and preventing them from breaking free and wandering into the skies. This is also true of the planet itself, which is, in a similar manner, also subdued by the larger earthly bodies of the universe.

The earth, understood as the whole of matter itself, therefore transcends the limitations of our experience, which is confined, with very few exceptions, to the surface of the blue planet, the muddy soil from which man has built a world, full of things that he has shaped according to his vision, often concealing their earthly nature to the eye of men blind to their own materiality. But man foremost is an individual, prisoner of his own ego, and it is through his personal experience of the earth that he may discover a way to extract himself from his condition. It is through his relationship with his materiality, and the materiality, that is, the earthly nature, of the things that play a role in his life that he may become aware of his place in the flow of nature. This is why the nature of such a relationship with the things of the earth will now be examined.

Teh Ching, np. but modified to better fit the present work (Ch. 8).

1.2 Awareness of the Things of the Earth

To break the spell of everydayness that blinds man to the things with which he is the most intimate often requires a fair amount of luck, and a set of circumstances that will allow him to begin to see beyond appearances and gain an awareness of his relationship with this newly (re)discovered “thing.” Such an event may completely shatter man’s previous worldview, bringing a blazing light to the darkness of his conscience, thereby causing him to be reborn, into a brand-new world where he will finally see things for what they are. Such a fortunate event will nonetheless almost always come through a trial, an unpleasant experience, one that will serve as a trigger for the breaking of the spell.

The things of the earth are casting such a spell on the large majority of the men living upon its surface. They are the objects filling our daily lives, the tools that we use to work, the vessels in which we eat, and even the houses that we inhabit. Men are relentlessly chasing after these things, even devoting their whole life to their possession and accumulation, seeking to have the best of what the earth and man’s hands have to offer. Left unbridled, this desire turns men into a ravening mob, whose hunger for things of the earth is never satisfied, as their ego absorbs these things and grows, unrestrainedly. During this unlimited pursuit of earthly things, incidents may nonetheless occur, which may lead them to question their behavior.

It is when difficulties occur in the pursuit of things that their nature and effect on man may be revealed. A hint concerning one of such situations is succinctly described by Laozi:

金玉滿堂，莫之能守。
 “When gold and jade fill the hall,
 their possessor cannot keep them safe.”¹³

This sentence points out the heart of the pursuit of earthly things: possession. Man possesses something when he can prevent

¹³ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 24. English translation from: Lao Tzu, *The Tao Teh Ching*, np. (Ch. 9).

others from getting hold of it. This usually implies storing it in a place with clear boundaries, made of earth, stone or wooden walls, which render physical access impossible. This is also the essence of a home, which is a space, either taking advantage of nature or shaped by the hands of man, that offers safety from the threats that lie beyond the walls: other men, wild animals, or even the forces of nature. The ravening pursuit of the things of the earth cannot exist without a home. Before the advent of technology, a pure nomad would not have been able to keep and carry, and therefore possess, more than a few earthly things. The sedentary lifestyle adopted by most of mankind since the agricultural revolution has profoundly changed this situation, encouraging man to create always larger enclosures to store an always increasing number of precious things.

The lust for the things of the earth is nonetheless shared by most men, and therefore, by hoarding precious things like gold and jade, one attracts jealousy and covetousness. The word “hall” (堂¹⁴) used by Laozi precisely designates a place where people from the outside are brought in, a place of passage, where the objects of envy can be seen and approached. This activity fills the owner of the hall with pride, as others can witness how successful he has been in the pursuit of earthly things, but with this pleasure also comes a danger. As more and more people know about the owner’s wealth in products extracted from the body of the earth, precious metals and stones, thieves will inevitably come to hear of it. Having put so much effort into his pursuit of things, it will cause anxiety in the owner’s heart, who will dedicate time, effort, and even a part of his wealth to ensure that these things remain in his possession.

Growing more and more attached to his things as his collection grows in size and value, and more fearful of its disappearance, the owner may come to realize that this attachment more and more looks like chains that bind him tightly to these earthly things. The anguish caused by the fear of theft, or even perhaps the shock of their actual disappearance, not only through the agency of robbers but also as the result of natural disasters, for example, may become the source of a yearning for freedom, a desire to shatter the fetters that prevent him from leaving this hall with peace of mind.

¹⁴ 【táng】.

The discovery of the chains binding him to his precious things can lead the man to an awareness: he is as much owned by these earthly things as he owns them. These objects restrict his freedom of movement, as he cannot move away without careful planning, for example, for the packing and transport of his things. Their safety must always be considered, requiring sealed rooms and guards at the door, implying increasingly higher expenses that force him to have a continuous source of income, therefore also binding him to the work producing these revenues.

The dangers brought on by the riches in the hall are nonetheless not limited to the things themselves. His own flesh, and his own being, may be threatened by them, as other men will progressively turn into ever-more voracious wolves as his wealth increases, and they will not refrain from the most despicable acts to satisfy their greed for the possession of parts of the earth. What the owner may face is more than the dispersal of his wealth: the abduction of himself or his loved ones, torture, or even execution. No action would be too base for a wolfpack that has smelled blood and has its prey in sight.

Furthermore, the fire of greed kindled by the things in the hall may also deeply (re)shape the owner's relationships with other human beings. Wanting a share of the gold and the jade that he possesses, men and women will come close to him, becoming friends or lovers, giving him the impression that he is loved and admired for his greatness and superiority. Only the trial of poverty would be able to reveal the fact that those people would desert and maybe even despise him if he were to lose his precious collection of earthly things. These things may therefore deprive the owner of meaningful, loving relationships with true friends or a spouse, replacing them with ones based on venality.

The things of the earth hold power over men and, in particular, over the one owning them. The extent and strength of this power are proportional to their value in the eyes of humans. As the storehouse is fed with more and more precious things, it grows into an increasingly vigorous beast. At one point, this power surpasses the one of its master, and a reversal occurs: the possessor becomes possessed; the object becomes the subject, and the master is turned into a slave to his things. The things make man work in order to be able to offer them protection, and even to pay for

the hall housing them. They force man to stay near them, as the slave brings visitors from afar who stand in awe of their beauty and value. His friends and his wife are often more often attached to them than to him, and if they had to choose between the two, their choice would easily be made, and the owner-turned-slave would be left with nothing.

This fate of the possessor who becomes possessed by his things is nonetheless far from ineluctable. As the things of the earth exert an increasingly stronger pull on their creature, the nature of their power becomes more and more conspicuous. The constraints that they impose on man's life may lead him to become aware of the reversal that occurred between possessor and possessed. The desire to be able to wander around the earth without impediment may become stronger than the need to possess the mass of gold and jade filling up the hall. The desire to be loved for himself rather than for his collection of valuables may prevail over the need to be praised and envied by those surrounding him, and over the lust for power over men and women. He may even realize that his worst fears may be the best things that may happen to him. To be left with nothing, that is, the vanishing of his wealth and of the friends and family members who were more attached to his earthly things than to him, may turn out to provide him relief, to represent the lifting of a hidden burden that prevented him from accomplishing his destiny, as a man.

The awareness of the effect of the things of the earth on man's life opens up the path toward a greater consciousness of the nature of things. The heart of this newfound awareness is the realization that attachment to things of the earth, which has been heavily encouraged by most cultures across history, may be detrimental to man's spiritual development. Far from leading him to a feeling of fulfillment, the pursuit of the things of the earth may only increase his frustrations, artificially inflate his ego, and leave him like a little child, as much a slave to his emotions as to his own "toys."

The aforementioned hint given in Laozi's treatise, the hall filled with gold and jade, nonetheless only represents one possible trigger for such an awareness. Other men may discover different ways to come to the same realization. As we have seen, a profusion of things may serve as such a trigger, but the opposite situation, a lack of things of the earth, may have the same effect. Someone

constantly living in frustration, seeing other men being more successful than him in their pursuit of the things of the earth, will often dedicate a large part of his time and efforts to fulfill his material needs. Feeling humiliated by what he perceives as an injustice, his ego hurt by this inequality, he may be ready to do anything to succeed in his endeavor, including becoming a thief coveting the gold and the jade which are kept in the hall of his neighbor.

The life of the poor thief is centered around his frustration, his greed for things. His friends and acquaintances are chosen with their wealth in mind: they are men and women who may be useful to him in his pursuit of things, which, contrary to the owner, may not only be superfluous ones, simply meant to inflate his ego or provide him with pleasures of the senses, but also things truly necessary for his survival: food, clothing, shelter, or weapons. In all cases, the effects of desire are nonetheless the same. His time on the earth is devoted to chasing things of the earth. He is a slave to his desire, which drives him to disregard his honor and the accomplishment of his nature as a human being. He has no peace of mind, no durable satisfaction, and only one objective: to possess more. He cannot live a life of contemplation in the wilderness or a simple family life far away from troubles and competition of other men driven by desire. He rather needs to stay close to those he perceives to be his competitors, those who possess a large number of things, such as the owner of the hall. He is bound to them and to the cities that concentrate the wealth of the land. It is there that the thief will have opportunities to satisfy his ambitions.

The thief therefore has a lot in common with the owner of the hall. The latter is bound to his wealth while the former is bound to the wealthy, but both are slaves to their ego. The owner is driven by the inflation of his ego produced by his riches, while the poor thief is driven by the humiliation of his ego. The effect is nonetheless the same: they are both possessed by the things of the earth around which their life gravitates. One is possessed by the things he owns, while the other is possessed by the things that he covets.

The pursuit of the things of the earth is nevertheless not something that can or should be abandoned completely. It is indeed one of the most important driving forces of Life itself, as all animals need to move their own body around the earth to acquire the

means necessary for them to survive. Man craves food because he cannot live more than a few weeks without it. He seeks fresh water because he would return to the earth within a few days without access to the precious liquid. If there were no oxygen, product of other forms of life millions of years ago, which in turn came from the earth itself, his last breath would come within a few minutes at most. It is therefore perfectly natural for him to seek some of the fruits of the earth, but there is a fundamental difference between the satisfaction of such natural needs and the behavior of both the rich owner and the poor thief, as in the latter case the goal is the flattering of the ego rather than survival.

For each one of the fundamental material needs of man, that is, his need for the fruits of the earth, there comes a point at which this need is met, a time when he no longer needs to continue the pursuit of this precise type of earthly thing and can turn his attention and devote his time to another endeavor. Then comes a choice: does he continue to seek this thing, despite having no true need for it, only the pleasure to do so, or does he stop?

Once again, the Chinese philosopher offers us a few words of wisdom concerning this matter:

知足者富。

“Fortunate is the one who knows what is enough.”¹⁵

No matter how many things he possesses, the rich owner always wants more. Not only his immediate natural needs are entirely fulfilled, as he dwells in a warm and safe home, gorging himself on the finest dainties available and enjoying the pleasures of the flesh with the most beautiful women, he also has more than what he will be able to consume during his lifetime. Nothing will ever be enough, and he will never truly be content.

Despite their great difference in wealth and social standing, the life of the poor thief is remarkably similar to the one of the rich owner. Both devote their life to the same purpose: the more that is never enough. Even if the thief struggles to meet the needs of

¹⁵ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系 〈7〉 老子 莊子上巻》, p. 65. TBA (Ch. 33).

知足者富

his body, the insecurity caused by his situation and the frustration induced by the humiliation of his ego encourage him to continue his pursuit of things, even when he no longer has a real need for more.

According to the ancient word-builders who crafted the ideogram representing the fact of being “fortunate” in Chinese (富¹⁶), a fortunate man seems to be someone who lives in a building that is filled with furniture. Fortune is therefore associated with the possession of a profusion of things, and a fortunate man is someone like the aforementioned owner of the hall filled with gold and jade.

According to Laozi, however, to be fortunate is not to have plenty of things, to have things to spare, or even to have enough to maintain one’s flesh above the surface of the earth. It rather is to *know* what is enough, to recognize the point of equilibrium between lack and excess, between what one needs and what one wants. There is a continuum measuring man’s possessions: on one end there is a need, and on the other greed, and only on a single point of this continuum is man blessed with satisfaction, the point where one has enough to meet his essential needs. But more than the satisfaction of his needs, his fortune rather comes from his knowledge of the nature of this point of equilibrium. He may be in a state of need and be blessed with the wisdom of knowing that the goal of his quest for things is within reach, and that this quest will not be the center of his life. He will reach this point, and he is fully aware that he will then be able to focus his efforts on other endeavors, such as his spiritual growth, for example.

One who has far more than what he needs may also be or become aware of the point of equilibrium between need and greed. His wealth may have come to him suddenly and naturally, through inheritance for example, thereby rendering the superfluous nature of this material prosperity somewhat obvious, as he lived without it before. He may also simply have discovered this point of equilibrium after being a slave to his greed for many years. What matters is not the way by which one comes to this awareness, or even the fact that one personally is in a state of need or one of excess, but rather the awareness itself. The point of equilibrium therefore is visible from any point of the continuum. Fortunate are the ones seeing it, no matter where they are located on the spec-

¹⁶ 【fù】.

trum of wealth and, in contrast with this, someone who has just enough may ignore his own situation, cursed by a cecity rendering him unable to know what is enough, leading him either to continue the pursuit of things toward excess or to squander his wealth up to the point where he will lack the most necessary things.

One is “fortunate” to know what is enough, firstly in the sense of being “rich,” not necessarily in things of the earth, material wealth, but also in spiritual blessings. Another sense of the English word nonetheless also befits Laozi’s sentence, even though it is not found in the Chinese word used by the philosopher: the fact that this knowledge also comes as a gift of Fortune, bestowed by destiny on men who were not necessarily more deserving of it than any other. Few men know what is enough, and therefore are free from the yoke of greed. The rest of them live as slaves to their pursuit of earthly things, no matter how much they possess. They are chained to the things that they own or that they covet, as mosquitoes uncontrollably attracted to fire, unable to see that they will end up being burnt if they reach what they seek.

As this knowledge also comes as a gift, its recipient should also be grateful for this fortune. The earth sustains the fruit trees that fill the mountains and valleys, the crops that populate the plains, or the mushrooms that are found in the forests. The hand of his neighbors, his fellow men, also greatly contribute to his survival, the fulfillment of his daily needs, as they turn the wheat into flour and then bread, pick up the fruits on the highest branches of the trees, or seek the medicinal herbs that help him recover from an illness. If the world that man inhabits exists, a world that allows him to engage himself in the pursuit of things, it is because of this communion between men and the earth. Without them, a single man wouldn’t be able to survive or to speak and think. Conscious of this fact, a man should not only be thankful but also strive not to waste what has been offered to him, and not hoard resources that others might need, simply to remain alive.

Early men probably were more aware of what it means to have enough than us, children of modernity. They were hunter-gatherers who lived in a sparsely populated land with plentiful natural resources, but a land requiring a very high level of cooperation to exploit them, such as to hunt large game like mammoths or rhinoceros. Without permanent shelter, storerooms, or vaults,

they would be naturally enclined to avoid the unnecessary and to be content with simple things: a full belly, safety, warmth, companionship, the basic needs of all humans.

In modern times, in contrast with this, the earth has known an exponential population growth, a rapid depletion of natural resources, but also advances in technology that would have been unimaginable a few centuries ago and which allow the large-scale production of things, flooding the world with the both the necessary and the superfluous. Man's nature has nevertheless not significantly been transformed by this transition to modernity. He faces the same challenge when confronted with things as his distant ancestors, and little progress has been made that would help us not to become slaves to our things.

All along the history of mankind, men have faced the same choice when they reached the point when they had enough to satisfy their needs. They have been carried by the same emotions. Their ego, which paradoxically is what makes them feel unique, is in all points similar to the one of any other humans. One peculiarity still distinguishes them though: some of them have gained an awareness of their predicament and are careful to stay on the point of equilibrium between need and greed as if they walked on a tightrope. This awareness then slowly grows and matures. It does not come as a light switch, with which one would gain an instantaneous understanding of the significance of the knowledge of what is enough. The trigger only marks a beginning rather than an end, and the path toward illumination is a never-ending one.

The Chinese philosopher certainly is one of the best guides for those treading the path, and he has one more hint to give us concerning the question of man's relationship with the things of the earth:

祸莫大于不知足。咎莫大于欲得。
故知足之足，常足矣。

"There is no calamity greater than to ignore what is enough;
There is no greater disaster
than the desire to be getting (things).
Therefore the contentment of knowing what is enough is
an enduring and unchanging sufficiency."¹⁷

This quote appears somewhat similar to the previous one, but it shows an important difference with it. The Chinese philosopher told us that “fortunate is the one who knows what is enough” and he now tells us what occurs when one fails to gain such knowledge: calamity. This is more than a mere absence of fortune. It tells us that neutrality is out of the question: it is either fortune or calamity, and an awareness of the consequences of ignorance may be as important as the knowledge of what is enough itself. The one who knows will indeed necessarily be confronted with men who do not, and he needs to know how to react during such encounters. The calamities brought on by the ignorance of others will directly affect him and his world, and he may therefore decide to take action.

First, the cause and nature of this calamity should nonetheless be examined. The effect of the ignorance of what is enough is something that cascades throughout man’s entire world with astonishing rapidity and strength. Without knowing what is enough, men are servants of their greed and are never durably satisfied. As men value rarity, precious things are therefore rare by definition. As the availability of what is precious is very limited by nature, men must compete to obtain these precious things, which will allow them to feel more valuable themselves in the eyes of others and by their own ego. Such competition implies that men will tend to only work with others if it can help them further their personal pursuit of earthly things. They will either need to surpass others or to hinder their progress. Others are foes on the road toward material prosperity, and many will stop for nothing to be first in line.

One of the major effects of the ignorance of what is enough is the crumbling of solidarity between men, of their cohesion as a people or as a species. They become grasshoppers rather than ants, wandering the earth as an incoherent mob guided by their appetite, instead of efficiently working toward a common goal, relinquishing their individual wishes for the good of the whole of which they are part. Led by their lust for the things of the earth, they each strive on their own, attempting to build a pile of things that would be more impressive than the one of the men working next to them.

¹⁷ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 83. TBA. (Ch. 46).

Endlessly piling things up and standing on top of their collection, they feel as if they were elevating themselves above those who have been less industrious or less lucky in their pursuit, and yet are never satisfied with the result of their efforts.

When the ego reigns supreme over the interest of the whole, man's potential is wasted, as he is a social creature, who can benefit from his proximity with others. It is as if ants were attempting to live alone and fulfill all the different roles of the members of a colony, something incredibly inefficient. Instead of competing with each other, making random piles all very similar to the others, they could be working together toward a common goal and raise themselves higher than any individual could, but even this would be to succumb to the lure of the endless pursuit of the things of the earth. For the whole to be "fortunate," each one of its members needs to know what is enough, to know when the essential needs of the whole have been met. Then can the large-scale calamity be avoided.

The philosopher then tells us that "there is no greater disaster than the desire to be getting (things)." Desire certainly can be seen as the engine that puts all animals into motion. It is the driving force of all forms of life capable of moving their body to satisfy their cravings, for food primarily, but also for reproduction and power. For most creatures, such desire is purely instinctual, and it comes to them as soon as they are born onto the earth. It would seem that man alone has been endowed with a consciousness allowing him to restrain his desires, and to submit them to his reason. This is precisely the purpose of "knowing what is enough": to put on the brakes, to slow or stop the engine of desire that never stops on its own, even when it has succeeded in helping man satisfy the essential needs of his flesh.

The two elements, desire and the knowledge of what is enough, therefore represent complementary forces that allow man to find and to stand on the edge between need and greed. Without desire, man would not have any reason to roam the land, to search for water and food, to copulate and reproduce, or even to breathe. Without this mysterious and innate driving force, he would not live more than a few minutes without taking a breath, a few days without finding water, or a few weeks without finding food. Without the lust of the flesh, men might live until their old age, but

without descendants, their bloodline would die out with them.

Without knowledge of what is enough, man's desire nonetheless remains unbridled and uncontrollable, and it can become as destructive as it is productive. If a man is unable to tell when his belly is full, that is, when he has far more than enough to sustain his body but suffers from permanent hunger, a genetic disorder known as the Prader-Willi syndrome, he will be driven to eat continuously until his body is unable to cope with such excess of food. Fortunately, evolution has favored those among our distant pre-human ancestors who had been endowed with an instinctual ability to know when they had exceeded the amount of food that their body would need and be able to digest. Some knowledge of what is enough may therefore be innate, when it concerns biological needs, but it is not so concerning what is found outside of man's body. His flesh will tell him, sometimes violently, that he should not take more food or drinks, but he can nonetheless continue to amass things to eat without consuming them, stockpiling them in cellars and storehouses. In that case, only a mind, his own or someone else's, can lead him to interrupt this endless quest.

One should nevertheless keep in mind that, as Laozi tells us, the cause of the disaster is not the fact that one possesses a certain amount, large or small, of things, but rather the desire to *get* more. One could sit on a pile of gold and be driven mad by a lust for more, while a penniless drifter, like the Greek philosopher Diogenes the Cynic for example, may be content living in the streets and eating crumbs falling from the table of men richer than him. What matters is one's relationship with the things of the earth, which also represents one's attitude toward the earth itself. To *get* is to take or to receive from something or someone and then to possess what has been obtained. The harmful desire mentioned by the philosopher is not the desire to satisfy one's wish to continue to live, but rather the desire to *get* for its own sake, for the inflation of his ego or his fear that he one day may lack something. If the pleasure sought by the greedy is not derived from the amount of what is possessed but rather from the very fact of obtaining, of gaining something, one by definition will never be able to be satisfied, as satisfaction implies a tranquility, a motionlessness that is fundamentally incompatible with a desire to obtain more. This precisely is the question mentioned in the final part of the aforementioned quote.

The Chinese wise man indeed tells us that “the contentment of knowing what is enough is an enduring and unchanging sufficiency” (知足之足，常足矣). Here is the power of knowing what is enough: true satisfaction of the heart. No matter how many precious things one gets, the feeling of fulfillment gained through this action will always be very superficial and fleeting. To stand on the edge between need and greed is not only a way to avoid unnecessary effort or to avoid the wasting of earthly things in order to benefit the whole of which man is part. It rather represents the only path toward the true satisfaction of his heart, the true fulfillment of his nature. Once this knowledge has been gained and has permeated one’s core, it can never be lost or taken away, and then one’s lot is always enough. This awareness, however, only marks the beginning of the path.

1.3 Examination of the Things of the Earth

An awareness of the role of the things of the earth in man's life is only a first spark, but one that has the potential of kindling a blaze that will illuminate his world. In order not to die out and be forgotten, this spark must nonetheless be nurtured and fed. The awareness must become the beginning of an investigation, a search to dis-cover the role played by the things of the earth in our lives, and what role are they meant to play. The most renowned disciple of Laozi thus described the importance of such a work:

今世俗之君子，多為身棄生以殉物，豈不悲哉！
 凡聖人之動作也，必察其所以之，與其所以為。
 今且有人於此，以隨侯之珠彈千仞之雀，
 世必笑之。
 是何也？則其所用者重而所要者輕也。
 夫生者，豈特隨侯之重哉！
 “Isn't it lamentable that most worldly gentlemen
 have disregarded their natural disposition and sacrificed
 life in pursuit for material possessions?
 Whatever action a sage takes, he will examine
 the purposes and the reasons carefully.
 If a man is now shooting at a high-flying sparrow
 with a precious pearl, the world will surely
 laugh at him. Why? Because he is paying such a high
 price for an insignificant gain.
 Isn't life more valuable than a precious pearl?”¹⁸

The words of Zhuangzi are precise, and he has a clear view of the contrast between man's potential and what most men accomplish. They abandon life for things, but life here not only means their own life, the time they spend above the earth and what they do with it, but also the whole formed by Life itself, in which it may seem that they are meant to play a part that goes beyond the mere accumulation and consumption of earthly things. The pursuit of the things of the earth seems to represent a betrayal of

¹⁸ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi. *Zhuangzi*. Trans. by Wang Rongpei, Foreign Languages P, 1999. P. 490. English translation based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 491 (Ch. 6), but modified to better fit the present work.

man's destiny and of his very nature, like a caterpillar that would try to refuse to become a butterfly, trying to keep feeding on leaves indefinitely and ignoring the fact that it is called to conquer the sky by nature itself. Such is the life of a man who lives for the things of the earth, as he is also shaped by nature to soar in the highest skies and elevate himself above the earth that begat him and from which he was formed. Fortunately, man is not an animal devoid of reason. He is fully capable of avoiding being stuck on the earth, if only he tries, or is led by men who are aware of the danger that will befall him.

The reason explaining man's lingering on the earth, that is, a disregard for the heavenly, the spiritual, to take refuge in an illusory attempt to possess the earth, is ignorance of the implications of such worship of material things. In order to save himself from this, he needs to *examine* himself and the earth, to see where does this attraction to things comes from, and where does it lead him: causes and effects.

The root of the pursuit of things is an unshakable faith in possession, which is not only an abstract concept: it also is a part of man's sensory experience of the earth. It is not only manifested as a metaphysical idea, but also linked with physical, earthly actions and objects. Possession is nonetheless not unique to man. A wide range of animals also exhibit behaviors that betray a possessive attitude toward things of the earth. A mountain lion will urinate to mark its territory, offering an olfactive signal informing other creatures that they should keep out of a particular part of the surface of the earth. An eagle will prevent other birds from coming near the carcass of its prey by aggressively chasing them away, putting its body between them as long as meat remains on it. Ants bring leaves from the open country into the depths of their subterranean dwelling to store them in their pantry, keeping them safe, under the protection of specialized soldier ants and using the earth itself as an impenetrable barrier. Such behaviors can nonetheless be distinguished from the lure of gain that leads man to pile up gold in his hall and to waste his life in trivial pursuits.

The possessive behavior of the aforementioned animals indeed directly is the result of a physical need, for their survival. They instinctively know what is enough for them, and rarely take more than what they need. The mountain lion will not spend his days

roaming and marking a land that would greatly exceed what he needs as a hunting ground. An eagle will not continue to kill and pile up carcasses once he is satiated, and ants will not collect more than what their colony needs to sustain itself. To do so would only be to waste time and resources. It would serve no purpose. To them, possession is only a means for survival, and when survival is ensured, what is possessed can be discarded. Why, then, do so many men spend their entire lives trying to possess more than what they need? Why do they shoot a high-flying sparrow with a precious pearl?

The beginning of an answer comes from a fundamental difference between men and animals: the latter are ruled by a combination of their instinct and their sensory experience of the earth, while the former are equally ruled by something unique to them: their ego. This powerful force is what can lead man to disregard his own life, and even to end it willingly, something unknown to the rest of the animal world. If one carefully observes the flow of nature, it would seem easy to conclude that the purpose of all forms of life would be their own perpetuation, their survival and reproduction. Only man can be seen to refuse to reproduce and refuse to continue to live, showing how unique he is among Life itself. Only he may value things that are completely useless to his survival and reproduction. Only he may produce and enjoy works of art, pursuing beauty at the cost of his own life.

The primacy of beauty and greatness over usefulness is one of the main causes behind man's unbounded pursuit of the things of the earth, and the metaphor used by Zhuangzi represents a perfect example of this. The Chinese sage indeed tells us that the world will laugh at the one shooting a pearl at a high-flying sparrow, but not that it would be ridiculous by itself. The pearl's value is only found in man's eye, and it is completely devoid of any practical use for the survival of both men and animals. It is valued by men for its beauty and the prestige associated with its rarity, giving to the one who possesses it a feeling of greatness. For any other form of life, it is completely worthless, as it contains no nutrients; it cannot be used as a shelter, and wouldn't even help them to attract a mate and reproduce. The sparrow, on the other hand, would be sought by countless creatures, as its flesh would be able to sustain their body for a while, including man himself. A herd of pigs would prefer that the farmer would throw sparrows at them than pearls,

and a man marooned on a desert island would also have more use of a single hen than of a mountain of jewels. This shows that *the world*, seen as the sum of all the egos of a community of men living together, would not necessarily be wise enough to value life over a feeling of greatness and artificial value. Indeed, "Life is more valuable than a precious pearl," and the sparrow is both part of Life and a means by which creatures can prolong their own lives, showing that the opinion of the world may lead man away from life itself.

The value of the sparrow may also be found in something other than its flesh. As the religious tradition of the West tells us, the small creature may also show us the way: "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:26). The sparrow does not gather things that he will not immediately use, such as twigs to form a nest, and yet it lives on, fed by the earth and by Life itself. In the aforementioned quote, Jesus enjoined men to look at the natural world, to observe the creatures leading a simple life upon the earth, in the seas, or the air. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, enjoined the sage to look for causes and consequences. Doing both of those things, man is called to search for a larger order in nature, to look and find out how nature works and, in turn, how should he spend his days above the surface of the earth.

From the way of life of the smallest creature, up onto the motion and changes of the largest elements of the universe, that is, the course of the sky, nature itself is a book, wide open for man to read and written in the plainest of all languages, the one of the senses, but one that is nonetheless seldom read with the attention it deserves. The earth is full of meaning, waiting to be discovered and that would transform man's life for ever, if only he realized the number of precious things on which he treads down each passing day.

As the sky is too clear to attract our attention, and the earth is too impenetrable by our superficial minds, more simple books have been written by men who were able to decipher the language of nature, explaining us what is too plain for us to see, in words less perfect but more accessible to the beginner walking on the path. Such a work of guidance is the *Treatise on the Way and*

Virtue, which offers us the following hint concerning how nature works:

天之道，其猶張弓與。
 高者抑之，下者舉之。
 有餘者損之，不足者補之。
 天之道，損有餘而補不足。
 “May not the way of the sky be compared
 to the bending of a bow?
 What was high is brought low,
 and what was low is raised up.
 (So the sky) diminishes where there is superabundance,
 and supplements where there is deficiency.
 It is the way of the sky to diminish superabundance,
 and to supplement deficiency.”¹⁹

In order to find a harmony between man and the things of the earth, one must first look at the earth itself. The earth is contained by the sky, which shelters and enfolds everything that exists. The course of man's life follows the course of the earth, which is itself caught in the flow of the heavens. It is thus paradoxically necessary to raise our eyes toward the sky to be able to clearly see what we stand on, the earth that begat us. The “way of the sky” is the course of the sky, the flow of being in which all things are caught, unable to escape it as long as they exist. It is also *the way* better known by its Chinese name: the Dao (道²⁰), from which the philosophy of Laozi and his followers takes its name, Daoism. It is not a god, nor a spiritual path that one is meant to follow, but the very course of the creation, the way followed by nature itself, which is a model of harmony and perfection. It would seem that it is nature itself, the way of the sky, that man is called to take as an example to find harmony in his own life. It is by submitting itself to the flow of nature that he can dis-cover and occupy his rightful place upon the earth and under the sky.

The Chinese philosopher does not pretend to under-stand the

¹⁹ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 125. English translation based on the one found in: Lao Tzu, *The Tao Teh Ching*, np. but modified to better fit the present work. (Ch. 77).

²⁰ 【dào】.

損有餘而補不足

way of the sky. He opened his treatise on the way by declaring the impossibility of accurately describing it: “the way that can be spoken is not the eternal and unchanging way”²¹ (道可道，非常道). Here, he simply asks a question: isn’t the way of the sky similar to the bending of a bow?

The body of the bow, that is, what is either brought high or low, is the earth and the sky, what is caught in the flow, following the way. The string of the bow, that is, what keeps its extremities in tension with each other by bringing one end high while lowering the other is the laws of nature, how all that is caught in the flow of space and time finds its equilibrium. The way is the work of the string on the bow, the quiet harmony that is the result of a perfect balance between opposite forces.

The things of the earth are all caught in the course of the sky, and just like the bow, these things can be used by man because of the harmony of nature, following the way, which allows a certain order to emerge from chaos and gives nature its laws, which are enduring and unchanging, serving as a basis for the existence of all earthly things. The earth itself, the planet on which we stand, represents an example of such harmonious equilibrium exhibited by the things following the way. Formed by the attraction of various bits of matter surrounding the sun, it progressively concentrated and hardened, becoming a globe of molten lava with a heart of red-hot iron. Spinning around itself, it has been shaped into a sphere, as the gravitational attraction between each particle forming the earth works to keep its body in equilibrium, making the mountains that grow too tall crumble under their own weight and filling up the deepest chasms with the dust and water that surrounds them. The earth is itself like a bow, kept bent around itself, given a stability that allowed its crust to cool down, ultimately allowing life to sprout, first in the seas and then all around its surface.

The equilibrium and harmony nurtured by the way nonetheless do not imply a staticity, a motionlessness. The quiet harmony favored by nature is a frame into which something can develop, into which the energy of the chaos can be channeled to produce something. The bow’s usefulness comes from the harmonious tension and the equilibrium between the wooden body and the string,

²¹ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上巻》, p. 11. (Ch. 1).

but its usefulness is only revealed when the bow is used, when a man pulls the string away and releases it to propel an arrow, as the equilibrium is temporarily broken and the energy stored in the bow is transferred to the projectile, while both the string and the wooden body of the bow oscillate chaotically for a little while before reaching back their original state.

Life also can be seen as exhibiting such channeling of energy, which flows through the way to produce something. It is like an engine, whose usefulness comes from the balance between the work of competing forces pushing a piston in opposite directions, thereby making its wheel(s) turn. Life sprouts and evolves because of a series of similar mechanisms. An example would be how animals strengthen their lineage through natural selection: males more often than not must compete to find mates, with the females choosing the one they perceive to be most fit to reproduce with. Males will therefore strive to be the best, at hunting, fighting, parading, or accumulating things, in order to satisfy their need for copulation and reproduction by possessing the most prestigious mate. This strife between creatures and between sexes is one of the driving mechanisms of evolution. It is through this relentless battle that life propagates itself and gains strength with each new generation, growing more resilient, more resistant, and more willing to survive.

Life itself, as a whole, a super-organism formed by the sum of all forms of life, as the trillions of cells forming the body of a man, is part of such a mechanism. Life is a force that does not by itself know what is enough. It propagates itself as extensively and as quickly as it can, without awareness of the consequences of this unrestrained growth. The way nonetheless reins in this expansion, through the agency of the work of the earth and the sky, which puts boundaries to this proliferation. Earth and sky both keep life at the surface of the earth, nonetheless without smothering it, letting it extend itself modestly into the heavens, the birds in the heavens, and into the ground and the deepest seas, the fish, worms, and insects.

The earth, the sky, and the life between them, including man himself, are all equally advancing through time following the way, as a marble rolling down a track. Without the need for a willful intervention, an anthropomorphic god controlling the course of the sky and of all that it contains to give it meaning, the creation seems

to ineluctably follow the way which is set in front of it. It would nonetheless seem that man finds himself in a unique position: the power play between the lifeforms driving evolution has led him to develop a conscience of his environment, of his own being, which is not found among any other creature found on the earth. He can not only gain an awareness of the nature of the way but can also decide to take a stand regarding its work, either actively opposing it, that is, himself becoming a force working against the course of nature itself, or on the contrary, become an agent of the way, participating in its work and living in symbiosis with the whole of nature, embracing the way as part of himself.

As a being thrown onto the earth, experiencing a world through the lens of his senses and of his reason, man is at all times confronted with the actions of other men who, like him, may either oppose or accompany the course of nature. He therefore constantly must decide whether to intervene in the great play unfolded in front of his eyes. The quality of the man who has a clear vision of the way and who has decided to embrace it is named virtue (德²²) by the Chinese philosopher. This is the second word of the title of his work, the *Treatise on the way and virtue* (道德经²³), reflecting the contrast and complementarity between the way and virtue. The way is the course of the sky and of all that it encompasses, while virtue is a quality of the man who has embraced the way, who has seen the flow in which all are caught and has consciously chosen to embrace it.

The virtuous nonetheless does not necessarily actively “work” for the way or for nature itself. His embracing of the way is displayed in his general attitude at all times and toward all things rather than in a series of determinate deeds, and this for a very good reason: following the way, nature itself does no such work, as it possesses no will. Nature only flows, running through time following the course traced by the way, always finding its equilibrium without striving for it. A virtuous man, having let the way permeate his whole being, would therefore bring low what is high and bring high what is low. He would diminish where there is a superabundance and supplement where there is a deficiency, imitating the way of the sky but without thinking about it, without

²² 【dé】.

²³ 【dào dé jīng】.

calculation or premeditation.

Virtue is therefore more than a quality: it is the way of life of someone who has embraced the way and has been able to let it penetrate the core of his own being. As it is discovered and appropriated, it changes man's relationship with everything, including the things of the earth. It teaches man not only what is enough, but also what is lacking. It shows him where there is an overabundance of things and where there is an insufficiency of them, thereby encouraging him to compensate for these imbalances. Such behavior would seem to be instinctual neither in man nor in animals, when they are seen individually. Life as a whole may nonetheless be seen as exhibiting a harmony with the way that may be likened to what we described as virtue, even if it has no consciousness of its own.

It was stated earlier that life by itself knows no boundaries. It does not know what is enough and grows as much and as extensively as the earth and the sky allow it. Both the sky and the earth on the one hand, and life on the other, exhibit a symbiotic relationship that always finds an equilibrium when sudden or brutal changes in one or the other appear. Such symbiosis can also be observed within life itself. One example would be the way by which species coevolve to adapt themselves to the evolution of another one, such as hummingbirds and bird-pollinated plants, with birds developing longer beaks to be able to reach the flowers' nectar, and the flower themselves developing shapes and colors that are more likely to attract the hummingbirds, which they need in order for their pollen to be carried to other plants and thereby reproduce. No matter what occurs, within certain limits, of course, life finds a way to adapt and thrive, and an equilibrium, both within itself and with its environment.

Man can therefore consciously do what life, the earth, and the sky do naturally. While any severe imbalance in the affairs of men also always reaches a harmonious equilibrium if given enough time, man may nonetheless play a part, facilitating the flow of the creation. He does not need to "work" for this, that is, to actively search for things to rectify and place himself as a judge over other men and things. He rather only needs to treat the situations that present themselves to him in accordance with the way, that is, in a virtuous manner.

The silent dialogue, the quiet interaction between the way and the virtuous man is at the center of the way of life advocated by the Chinese philosopher. Once it has begun to penetrate man's life, it slowly influences each one of his actions and his thoughts, but the path is long, and the pitfalls are numerous. It would take more than a lifetime to understand the way, and therefore man is condemned to fail if he tries. One may nonetheless appreciate the beauty of a flower and be inspired by it without being able to understand the marvelous intricacy of its coming to life and blooming, and so one can stand in awe of the way and embrace it without understanding it.

Man only has to begin to tread down the path pointed out throughout the sky and the earth. The easiest way to begin is by letting the way transform his relationship with the things of the earth that he possesses or covets, as these are far more easily seized and manipulated than the things of the world, that is, things of the mind, or the things of the sky. This beginning is described by the Chinese philosopher in the very last section of his treatise, showing the reader where he must start as he finishes studying and is now called to put his knowledge into practice:

聖人不積，既以為人已愈有，既以與人已愈多。
天之道，利而不害。聖人之道，為而不爭。

"The sage does not accumulate.

The more that he expends for others, the more
does he possess of his own; the more
that he gives to others, the more does
he have himself.

With all the sharpness of the way of the sky,
it injures not; with all the doing in
the way of the sage he does not strive."²⁴

The sage, that is, the one embracing the way, recognizes both lacks and surpluses. When he has more than he needs, he does not hesitate to dispense his excess of wealth to those who are in

²⁴ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 130. English translation based on the one found in: Lao Tzu, *The Tao Teh Ching*, np. but modified to better fit the present work (Ch. 81).

need, but more than this, he does not unnecessarily plan ahead, even for his own needs. He does not fill granaries to be ready in case of a famine. He does not pile up gold in his vault in case of financial difficulties, nor does he amass weapons in case of war. He rather puts his trust in the way itself, in the capacity of nature to supplement where there is a deficiency and to diminish where there is a superabundance. He does not accumulate anything, leaving his fate, even his survival, in the hands of the natural order of the creation.

To put one's trust in the way nonetheless does not mean that one is certain that nature will always provide when one is lacking something, or relieve the one laden with an excessive burden. This rather means that one lets himself be carried on the way, not resisting the flow, no matter where it will take him, even onto death. Death is indeed fully part of life, and even perhaps its culmination. It is unavoidable, and the only uncertainty resides in the length of one's days, which may be long or short, but always will end in the same manner: with one's return to the ground, to the great body of the earth.

Without worry nor fear, the sage therefore does not make long plans. He does not search to satisfy the needs of the future but rather entirely focuses on the present and, in particular, on his experience of the flow of nature along the way. When something falls into his hands that he has no immediate use, he lets it go to someone who might need it. Doing so changes his relationship with things, the things of the earth in particular. He has use of a limited number of things, which allow him to survive or to better embrace the way, but he possesses nothing, in the sense that he does not take hold of them. They have been given to him, and he therefore uses them, but if they were to be taken or to disappear, he would not be distressed or angry. Living in awe of the magnificence of the way on which he is carried, silently and effortlessly, he contemplates the quiet harmony and enjoys the unfolding of his destiny.

The sage possesses nothing, even when he lives in a large house filled with countless instruments, tools, vessels, food, or artworks. He possesses less than a naked beggar living in the streets who treasures the single copper coin that has been thrown at him. And yet, he has more than most of the richest men who have trodden

the face of the earth. He indeed sees every thing as part of the whole of nature, the whole of the earth that is carried throughout the sky, which is itself carried along the way. He is part of this whole, and the whole belongs as much to him as to any other living being who has seen his own nature. *Possessing* nothing, he can see that he *has* everything.

The more man dispossesses himself of the earthly objects that he owns, giving them away to be used by others who have need for them, the more he can feel that the whole of nature is part of himself, that he *has* it. The possession of earthly objects indeed traces a line in man's world, separating the whole of the earth in two: on one side, the things that belong to him, and on the other, things that belong to other men. This demarcation creates frustration for the one who possesses less than his neighbor or lacks something that he either really needs or simply wants. As seen earlier, in the case of the man in the hall filled with jade and gold, it can also create fear or anxiety for the one who has taken or received more than other men, as he worries that his riches will be appropriated by others or vanish. All kinds of separation, of demarcation, create tension between the separated elements, which are made to stand against one another. By giving all things away, man can progressively make his domain, the collection of things that he possesses, smaller and smaller, until nothing is left and the demarcation between what is *his* and what is not fades away.

Without a clear line separating what man possesses from what he does not, the whole of the earth and the sky becomes his own. It does not exclusively belong to him. He does not possess it as an object that he can keep away from others, locked inside a chamber or guarded by men in arms. He rather shares it with every other creature and thing, *having* it without possessing it. It belongs to him, but he cannot grasp it, contain it, or prevent others from enjoying it.

The more the sage does for others, the more he edifies his own house, his own world. The more man gives away, the more he has. Giving, he does not lose. Doing, he does not spend. Possessing nothing, he has everything. Reciprocally, what others do also contribute to building his world, and he benefits from what they give to others. He belongs to the whole and to each one of its parts, to every man walking the earth and to all things. To belong

is nonetheless different than to be possessed, just like the sage can possess nothing and yet *have* everything. He belongs to the whole, to the earth and the sky, and to the world of men, but none of these possess him. They do not grasp him to restrain his freedom. He is bound to the course of the sky, led on the way without the possibility of leaving its path, but he is like a marble running down a track naturally, through the agency of the forces of nature itself, without any will to force the marble down a particular path and to reach a particular goal. The earth behaves toward man like a sage is supposed to behave toward the things of the earth: man comes out of it, being born out of its body, out of physical matter, but it does not intervene in its life more than necessary. The earth provides the condition for man to exist, keeping him close through gravity and warm enough through the heat of its core of molten iron, but it does not direct the course of his life, knowing that no matter what occurs on the surface, his body always belongs to the earth, as it is made of earth itself, and after his last breath will be scattered in the sky, his flesh will putrify and join back the source out of which it came. Taking care of man without holding him; giving him life without possessing him, the earth is a model for man to follow, a perfect example of something following the way.

The way of the sky is sharp, but it does not injure. It is sharp because nothing can stand in its way, like a torrent of water running through a deep valley. Even when it encounters an obstacle, it either takes it in its flow effortlessly or simply bypasses it. It can uproot and carry trees away, or slowly carve its way across granite, but the use of its force is always measured. It does not topple down mountains or dig tunnels. It does not take the shortest, straightest path to reach its destination. It rather takes the easiest one, running down at the lowest point, where water has already run down in the past, minimizing its impact on its surroundings. Sharp but soft, unstoppable but gentle, the earth and the sky are caught in the flow of nature, running down the way, without friction, without collisions, only a smooth motion forward.

The life of most men stands in contrast to the sharpness of the way. Many are those who are “blunt,” from the day they are born until the one when they are greeted back by the earth. Seeing an obstacle, they try to destroy it with brute force. Wanting to reach behind a mountain, they dig their way through it. They choose the straightest path, without counting the effort that they spend

in the process, or the impact that this choice will have on their environment. Posing themselves as judges of rights and wrongs, they relentlessly strive to shape the earth and their world so that they would take the form favored by their mind. Some do this on a very small scale, only arguing verbally with their neighbors and colleagues to reach their goal, while others find themselves in a position to impact the earth and the world of men as a whole, not hesitating to plunge humanity into wars, chaos, and destruction in order to reshape the world into what they envisioned.

The sage nonetheless lives a different life. He does not stand idle. He does not merely contemplate the course of the sky, silently standing on the earth while other men busy themselves in works and pleasures. The sage *does* but he does not *strive*. He lives but does not compete. He advances on the path but does not leave any trace of his passage, walking quietly, naturally avoiding any obstacle.

As was seen earlier, life itself is highly dependent on the battles and competition that are waged between its different parts. Living organisms need tension, between individuals, between sexes, and between species and kinds to evolve and to strengthen themselves. Strife is the engine driving life itself, and therefore how to explain that, according to the Chinese philosopher, the sage should not strive? Concerning life, one answer may be that while other living beings strive to survive naturally, following their instinct which encourages them to live and reproduce, man has been endowed with a consciousness of his nature and of the nature of the earth and the sky. He, potentially, can see the way and can decide to consciously follow it rather than simply be carried by the flow. He therefore can cease to submit himself to his instincts, cease from striving to survive by competing against other forms of life. Taken to the extreme, a complete cessation of any strife against other living beings would imply death in a rather short time. There is indeed no fundamental difference between the largest branches of the tree of life, such as plants and animals, and man needs to digest other forms of life in order to survive. He lives because other, weaker forms of life die. One may nonetheless imagine a kind of extreme diet in which one would only eat grains and fruits without taking the life of the plant that produced it, and only animals dying of natural causes, even if that would present serious difficulties on a large scale.

Concerning the things of the earth, an absence of strife is easier to imagine. Pushed to the extreme, this would imply refraining from being attached to any object. One would let his things be stolen without reaction, without anger toward the thief nor fear of the morrow, accepting one's death without worry if no food could be obtained, or if the cold winds of the winter were to take one's last breath away when found without warm clothes or shelter. An even more extreme view may even consider that the search for food, shelter, or the making of clothes are themselves forms of strives that would go against the way, implying that one could only wait for death, impassive and idle. Here can the falsehood of this argument be seen: to do so, to refrain from satisfying one's most essential needs to survive would be to fight against one's most deep-seated instinct, to strive against one's nature, and therefore against nature itself. Letting oneself starve to death would require an intense fight of the will against the body and the instinct that pushes man to survive. This would be to be blunt rather than to be sharp, to take the shortest path rather than to follow the lowest, most efficient one.

The way is never extreme. It always favors equilibrium over strife, but this does not mean that it is without turns and bumps. Man is meant to live the days appointed to him, no more, no less. For him, to embrace the way is to accept that it will decide the length of his life. He must simply do without overdoing. He must feed himself, clothe himself, and build himself a shelter, but these activities, which all imply a relationship with things of the earth, should not be one of dependency. He should not take more than he can use. He should not worry about the needs of the morrow, and he should not let the satisfaction of these basic needs come at any cost. If famine were to come to him, without anything he could do except taking from others who also share the same need, he should accept his fate without fear, but if he can live without letting himself be enslaved by his needs, the way leads him to do so, as this would be to embrace the course of nature and to avoid strife. Then would man truly be content, satisfied not only transiently, until new needs or desires appear, but rather for the entirety of his days on earth, without any wavering or doubt.

The follower of the way nevertheless never sees it perfectly. His horizon is always limited, and he must therefore always observe the earth, the sky, and life itself in order to have a better look at the

way in front of him. It is not only those who have embraced the way who can teach the sage, but all those carried by the course of the sky, including those who are resisting the way itself. The Chinese philosopher offers us a brief description of such people:

服文綵，帶利劍，厭飲食，
財貨有餘。是謂盜夸。非道也哉！
“They wear elegant and ornamented robes,
carry a sharp sword at their girdle,
pamper themselves in eating and drinking,
and have a superabundance of property and wealth;
— such (princes) may be called robbers and boasters.
This is contrary to the way surely!”²⁵

The three elements given as examples all have something in common: they represent some of the three most basic needs of man. Food naturally is the most essential of them all, having preceded all the other things, long before man's distant ancestors set foot upon the dry land. The two others, clothing and weapons, certainly are among the first things of the earth that man began to use after having evolved from a standing primate into a true human being. What is condemned by the philosopher here is nonetheless obviously not the use of the things themselves, but rather their misuse.

If animal skins began to be collected and pieces of cloth began to be woven, it is primarily because man progressively settled in lands far remote from the place where his ancestors originated. Having evolved in a temperate region of the earth, possibly in Africa, he shed most of the hairs of his body after countless generations, as they became a hindrance rather than an advantage. Suddenly moving into colder regions, man had no time to evolve to adapt to this new climate, and therefore had to use his wit to compensate and survive. The fur of other animals, which were shaped by the ages to fit this region, was cut and sewn into coats and boots, saving man from the icy winds of the plains of both the

²⁵ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 93. English translation based on the one found in: Lao Tzu, *The Tao Teh Ching*, np. but modified to better fit the present work (Ch. 53).

most northern and southern parts of the earth. This is why clothes have been invented, and why man is now dependent on them in most parts of the planet. Only long after did man begin to use clothes as a means of seduction, as displays of wealth or symbols of power. This is when the necessary became the superfluous, when the useful became vanity.

In the same manner, weapons were first manufactured in response to a need: to defend oneself against wild animals stronger than man, from the attacks of other men, or simply to hunt for food. Having no claws, horns, or venom, man had to once again rely on the one thing that nature reserved to him alone: a sharp mind. Like clothing, weapons nonetheless soon became objects of prestige, things of the earth that were carried to impart an impression of prosperity and power rather than to be means to defend their lives and find food.

Food and water are the most essential things of the earth for man. Their absorption replenishes his forces and gives him the energy to move upon the surface of the earth and to stay above it for a few days or weeks longer. When man has his fill, he nevertheless begins to transform his need for food into a quest of the senses and a way to display his wealth to others. He seeks the rarest creatures and plants, paying others to travel to the other side of the earth to satisfy his cravings for delights of the palate and for recognition of his peers. He drinks bottles of wine stored for dozens of years, and roasts the most elusive birds of the sky, leading men to spend hundreds of hours of work to prepare a single meal, while others die of hunger at the door of his banquet.

For someone who sees the world's value in terms of wealth and money, the inequality between the rich and the poor is merely the result of a difference of effort, of capacity, or of luck. The one who has more than enough should rejoice as he contemplates his wealth and boasts of his success to others, while the needy should simply strive more to reach the same level of material prosperity. Such an attitude toward the things of the earth seems to be the one that predominates in modern China, and it has now deeply permeated this culture, as shown by the fact that the standard greeting and wish during the celebration of the lunar new year is 恭喜發財 (【gōng xǐ fā cái】), which may be roughly translated as "I wish you (material) prosperity." This, however, would certainly

not have been a greeting chosen by the ancient philosopher, for whom superabundance was not only a waste but even something harmful.

Those who waste, those who use their wealth to produce displays of their own power over others, those who are blind to the futility of the inflation of their own ego that it represents, are not only people who fail to be gentlemen, to do good: they rather are robbers. Such a view is not exclusive to the East. The Christian tradition, in particular, shows numerous examples of saints and theologians making the same argument, among which is Saint Jerome, who said that “the superfluous things of the rich are the necessary things of the poor. The first is guilty of embezzlement by exclusively using them for himself. He steals from the poor what he does not give them.”²⁶ By needlessly holding onto things of the earth, such a man creates imbalances between men, thereby opposing the natural course of the sky. These imbalances between the hoarder of things and the needy exacerbate tensions within man’s world as a whole, and they become sources of pain, anger, conflicts, and ultimately destruction and death. He is called a “robber” and not simply a selfish person or a stingy man, a strong word, usually reserved for someone who takes away from someone rather than merely fails to give. This can be explained by the fact that these things, which are hoarded into halls or in secure vaults, do not naturally *belong* to him: they have been offered by nature itself to satisfy the needs of Life, and not only the personal needs of this particular individual. By hoarding things of the earth, man keeps away the gift of nature from those who are needing it, and to whom it rightfully belongs.

To embrace the way means that one naturally equilibrates the imbalances created by the chaos of the earth and the sky or, more frequently, those caused by his fellow men. He does so, but without striving, without making it a daily task. He does not deliberately look for things to fix inside his world. The hoarder, on the other hand, not only fails to embrace the way: he hinders the course of the sky, thereby also depriving himself of the true contentment enjoyed by those who accompany the flow of the creation.

²⁶ TBA, Secondary translation from the French one in: Noël Desverges, et al. *Complément de l'Encyclopedie moderne: dictionnaire abrégé des sciences, des lettres, des arts, de l'industrie, de l'agriculture et du commerce*. Firmin Didot Freres, Fils et Die, 1838. np.

Once he embraced the way, the sage began his new life by picking up a thing of the earth in his hand, examining its finest details and reflecting on its nature as “thing.” He has now been given some insights concerning the place that this thing occupies in his life and concerning the place that it is meant to have in it. This examination of the things of the earth nevertheless never ends. As his vision becomes clearer, following his advance on the path, he is led to look deeper into the nature of things. This implies not only a three-dimensional vision of earthly objects, as precise as it may be, but rather one including the course of the thing, as part of the earth, caught in the course of the sky, one with the way itself.

1.4 The Course of the Things of the Earth

If a man takes a look at the things surrounding him, either in his own home or outside, in cities and countryside alike, he can notice that these all have one thing in common: they all come from the same source. They were all shaped out of the earth, by nature itself, by the hand of man or the impulse of life. These material things all share the same point of origin, and they are all caught in the course of the sky. A single block of granite may become the raw matter for a multitude of things that will be scattered all across the face of the earth: one piece of it can be fashioned into a statue, preserving for the ages to come the likeness of a particular person, while another will be used as the cornerstone of a building. One piece will become a grain mill for a modest household, while another will be used as a tile decorating the palace of a king. Despite all the transformations that it can endure, the nature of the material remains the same, and it continues to be part of the earth itself.

In order for man to see the truth of the things of the earth, and thereby know the place that they should occupy in his life, he needs to stand back from their *presence*. He needs to look at them not only as things that are merely *here* and *now*, and rather as parts of the eternal and unchanging earth, caught in the course of the sky, following the way. Concerning this question, the Chinese tradition reminds us that:

天地萬物一體。

“The sky, the earth, and the myriad of things
all form one body.”²⁷

The heart of this saying, the one body formed by the myriad²⁸ of things (萬物一體), is very commonly used in modern Chinese, usually simply translated as “unity.” What it points out is the fact that all the things of the earth forever remain part of the great body of the earth, and that the earth itself is part of the sky.

²⁷ Original Chinese text from: 吕坤. 《呻吟语（明清小品）》. Beijing Book Co., 2016. np. TBA.

²⁸ Literally: “ten thousand things.”

天地萬物一體

The sky, the earth, and the myriad of things, that is, the world, are *one*. Like Russian dolls, in which the larger encompasses the smaller, the world is built upon the earth, which is carried by the sky, which follows the way, forming a cascade united by its largest element.

The ten thousand things of the earth (萬物²⁹) that surround us are one. This declaration is not a religious or cultural dogma. Neither it is a mere philosophical hypothesis, the personal view of philosophers who have spent too much time building things of the mind. It rather represents a truth that can be experienced with the senses as well as it can be contemplated with the mind. The cornerstone made from a block of granite remains a part of this block, which in turn remains part of a mountain or soil from which it was cut and extracted. In a perfect continuity, without objective boundaries separating things, this mountain can be seen as part of a larger range, a larger land, a continent, and ultimately just a part of the earth itself, which is encompassed by the sky. As will be seen in the next chapter, the separation into things only occurs in man's world. The earth was, is, and will remain a totality, a continuum without any definite, objective lines of fracture.

A consequence of a consciousness of the everlasting and unchanging unity of the earth is a considerable weakening of the relevance of the concept of possession. It ceases to be an abstract concept associated with a "right" of property, and is reduced to a mere capacity to prevent others from accessing or using a small part of the earth. Man has no inherent right to possess any part of it. All he can do is to demonstrate, by himself or through a higher power such as a government, a capacity to keep something away from other men or beasts, a capacity that is always transient, contrary to the earth itself. The things of the earth rise and fall. They are made and return to the dust. The earth, on the other hand, endures, always in motion and yet never fundamentally changed by the flow carrying it and by the hand of man. Man clings to the things he can hold within his hands, the things he believed he owned, until his last breath, but he carries nothing to his grave. Even if he is buried in the soil with his most prized possessions, it only makes his nature all the clearer: man and his things are one with the earth in which he has returned, but he never truly

²⁹ 【wàn wù】.

departed from it in the first place. His *possessions* were only the parts of the whole toward which he developed a deviant relationship.

One's attitude toward the parts represents one's consciousness of the nature of the whole. By developing a possessive relationship with the things of the earth, man only demonstrates his failure to perceive the essence of the earth itself. By coveting, hoarding, or wasting, he shows that he lives as a slave to his ego, tirelessly working to satisfy its insatiable greed, forgetting that he can find true contentment by submitting to the way, which shaped his nature. Focusing on insignificant parts, he neglects the whole of the earth and the sky. He fails to play his part in the great play of nature and hinders the walk of others who are following the way by preventing them from getting what they need from the earth.

As told in the aforementioned quote, the earth and the sky are more than an incoherent aggregate of things: they form *one body* (一體³⁰). The body of any living creature, the one of an amoeba or a human being, represents a formidable example of how nature can shape the earth into an incredibly complex assembly in which countless parts naturally and unconsciously play their part in a larger play, of which they are completely unaware but to which they nonetheless efficiently participate, submitting themselves to their nature. If a sufficiently large part of the body refuses to accomplish the task assigned to it by nature itself, the very structure of the whole collapses and the body crumbles in its entirety, killed by itself. The same goes for the earth and the sky, which also form a sort of giant organism in which each thing of the earth, of the world, and of the sky plays a part. By preventing things of the earth from being used for what they have been made, man goes against the flow of nature itself. He becomes a part striving against the whole, a cell fighting against the body. His relationship with these material things affects his relationship with the earth as a whole, and with the way itself. The cause of such deviant behavior is nonetheless not limited to a mere blindness to the unicity of the earth and the sky.

The blindness affecting the slave to the things of the earth is foremost one that affects his vision of himself. His ego leads him to think of himself as something standing outside of the earth

³⁰ 【yī tǐ】.

and the sky, something endowed with an immaterial spirit that would exist independently of the rest of the creation, something transcending matter, space, and time. He sees his own body as a device allowing him to visit and interact with the earth, but not something that is part of his essence. His body is his possession, his property, but not really part of his true self.

The Chinese Chan tradition, which can be seen as an heir of Laozi's philosophy of the way, points out something concerning the question of man's relationship with the earth and the sky, in a compendium called the *Blue Cliff Record* (碧巖錄):

天地與我同根，萬物與我一體。
 “The sky, the earth, and I have the same root;
 The myriad of things and I form one body”³¹

The sky, the earth, and the things forming the world all form one body, but it also includes man himself. Man is fully part of this giant thing that is carried along the way. He is one with the things of the earth and thus with the earth itself, which is one with the sky. This implies that man's relationship with the things of the earth not only represents his relationship with the whole of the earth, but also displays something about his inner nature. He himself is a thing of the earth, embraced by the sky, sharing the same essence with each part of the whole. His ego can lead him to falsely believe that he could exist independently of rest of nature, but this belief nonetheless finds its source in a true specificity that appears unique to man: he alone is indeed able to become conscious of the nature of the way, and of his place in it. He alone can make an informed decision regarding his behavior toward the way itself: either submitting to its flow and embracing it, or confronting and opposing it, refusing the yoke of nature and striving for independence from the rest of the creation.

Man's ego, his subjectivity, therefore is both what allows him to see the unicity of nature, making it appear as an object that can be observed and grasped, and what leads him to see himself as

³¹ Original Chinese text from: 吳平. 《新譯碧巖集（上）》. 三民書局股份有限公司, 2005. P. 452. English translation from: Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary. *The Blue Cliff Record*. Shambhala, 2005. P. 245 (40th case).

something that is not part of nature, and even may lead him to go against the way itself. This double-edged sword, bestowed upon him by nature, offers him a way to rise above the other creatures by entering in a true partnership with the way of the sky, but it can just as well bring him lower than the beasts crawling on the deepest parts of the earth as he, contrary to any other creature, is capable of hindering the course of nature through his own will and consciousness.

Fortunately for man, he also differs from the animals by his relationship with the sky, and with the flow of time that it embodies, in particular. Able to extract himself from his own *presence*, the fact that he only experiences the sky and the earth as a passing flow of present instants, he is also able to reflect on and to reconstruct the past, as well as to project himself into the future. The sky, the earth, and I have the same root. The use of the word “root” (根³²) is not fortuitous here. The Chinese ideogram itself, which contains the ideogram for a “tree” (木), points out to the fact that the creation represents an organism, with a common source and point of origin, and the same nature shared by all the things that are grown from it, like a gigantic tree sprouting out of an insignificantly small seed. The unicity of the sky, the earth, the world, and man, is not only something that is occurring now: it rather extends all the way from the apparition of the earth and the sky, as matter and space-time, until their end, if it comes.

Searching for the root of all things can therefore become a way for man to see the bond that links his nature to the nature of all things, and more particularly to the things of the earth. By reflecting and reconstructing the organic evolution of the earth and of the life that has grown and developed on its surface, he can realize how the perfect continuity of this process implies a blurring of the lines separating nature into “things.” The flow of nature, following the way, is not only one: it is also seamless, across space as well as across time. He can see himself as a thing of the earth, like any other, sharing the same root with them, and also the same course, and in all likelihood also the same end.

A consequence of the realization of the seamlessness between man and the things of the earth is a furthering of the loosening of the concept of possession. He never possessed anything, or he

³² 【gēn】.

always possessed everything. None of it matters, and both are one and the same. One can see that this was clear to the philosopher Zhuangzi, as he was ready to see his breath of life return to the sky:

莊子將死，弟子欲厚葬之。莊子曰：
吾以天地為棺槨，以日月為連璧，
星辰為珠璣，萬物為齎送。
吾葬具豈不備邪？何以加此！
While Zhuangzi was dying,
his disciples intended to prepare
many things to be buried with him.
When he learned of this, Zhuangzi said,
“The heaven and the earth will be my coffin.
The sun and the moon will be my jade rings.
The stars will be my gems.
Everything in the universe will be buried with me.
Don’t I have a complete list already?
Anything else will be redundant.”³³

Why take pride in being buried with gold and jade when he has the sun, the moon, the mountains, and the rivers. All the things of the earth and the sky were as much *his* as what others consider to be their earthly possessions: coins of gold or precious objects. More than this, his death will render any distinction between himself and the other things of the earth and the sky even more meaningless, as his very flesh will be burned and turned to smoke, carried by the wind to the highest clouds or buried into the soil, decomposed, and then ultimately brought by the rain into the darkest abyss, indistinguishable from the whole, even by man’s eye, which is eager to look for demarcating lines.

There is therefore no point in worshipping the bones and graves of the wise ones who showed us the way, as the following anecdote from the *Blue Cliff Record* reminds us:

³³ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 578. English translation from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 579.

天地為棺槨
日月為連璧
星辰為珠璣
萬物為賁送

源一日將鍬子，於法堂上，從東過西，從西過東。

霜云：「作什麼？」

源云：「覓先師靈骨。」

霜云：「洪波浩渺白浪滔天，覓什麼先師靈骨？」

One day Yuan took a hoe into the teaching hall and crossed back and forth, from east to west

and west to east. Shuang said,

“What are you doing?” Yuan said,

“I’m looking for relics of our late master.”

Shuang said, “Vast waves spread far and wide, foaming billows flood the skies—what relics of our late master are you looking for?”³⁴

Seekers and embracers of the way, such as the Chan monk Yuan, are not immune from the temptations associated with the things of the earth. Even once they have pronounced their vows and discarded all their earthly possessions, they can still be attached to certain things of the earth, such as the bones of their master. They can also possess things collectively: a monastery or a community may acquire, store, and worship things of the earth, which would belong to none of the members but to the group as a whole. This would somewhat soften the detrimental effect of the possessed things on the members’ relationship with the way, but far from taking man out of the pitfall of possession, it only makes its effect more insidious. Thinking of himself as someone devoid of earthly possessions, even taking pride in his independence from the things of the earth, he does not realize that he remains possessed by certain things, just like the rich man in his hall filled with jade and gold, but with a major difference: the hoarder of wealth would at least hardly be ignorant of his predicament. He would never think of himself as detached from the things of the earth, contrary to the monk, who may think that he has been freed from their yoke at the moment he uttered his vows.

The problem with man’s relationship with the things of the earth therefore is not limited to the fact that man possesses things: it foremost is the fact that he is possessed by them. The monk in-

³⁴ Original Chinese text from: 吳平, 《新譯碧巖集(上)》, pp. 589–590. English translation from: Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 317 (55th case).

deed does not possess any relic of his master, but he is nonetheless possessed, both by the things that he seeks and by his own desire for their appropriation. What is harmful to his relationship with the earth and the way is his attachment to things that may not even be real, not even be part of the whole of nature. He is lost if he cannot even see the fetters restraining his life, binding it to a few things whereas he could embrace the whole.

Awareness of this ignorance may nonetheless come, suddenly and without effort, as a gift of nature itself or as the fruit of a long reflection, the end of a long path strewn with snares. No matter through what means it is realized, man must realize that the fact that he owns no things of the earth; that he has no personal property, does not necessarily imply that he has been liberated from their yoke. Furthermore, such realization does not protect him from developing different forms of deviant relationships with the earth. The monk and his monastery may not own any thing of the earth, and they may beg for their sustenance, but they nonetheless can waste natural resources, waste the earth itself. A monk can take without need, even if he has nowhere to store things. He can destroy parts of the earth, willingly or unwittingly, even if he gains nothing from it. His monastic condition and his vows do not absolve him from the fact that whatever he uses, he takes it from the earth and from the other living beings living on its surface, without permission, and without any inherent “right” to do so. Man not only steals from other men, those who need these things of the earth far more than him, as it was seen in the previous pages: he also robs the earth daily in order to rise above other creatures and survive for a little while longer.

One of the earliest Chinese philosophers of the way, named Liezi (列子), well described man’s condition as a robber of the earth and the sky:

吾盜天地之時利，雲雨之滂潤，
 山澤之產育，以生吾禾，
 殖吾稼，築吾垣，建吾舍。
 陸盜禽獸，水盜魚鱉，亡非盜也。
 夫禾稼、土木、禽獸、魚鱉，
 皆天之所生，豈吾之所有？

“Well, the things that I steal are the sky and the earth,
 each in their season
 —the fertilizing rain-water from the clouds,
 and the natural products of mountain and meadow-land.
 Thus I grow my grain and ripen my crops,
 build my walls and construct my tenements.
 From the dry land I steal winged and four-footed game,
 from the rivers I steal fish and turtles.
 There is nothing that I do not steal.
 For corn and grain, clay and wood,
 birds and beasts, fishes and turtles are
 all born out of the sky.
 How can I claim them as mine?”³⁵

Man’s capability to discern the necessary from the superfluous, and his tendency to take more than what he needs from the earth, imply that he has a responsibility toward nature itself. The winged and four-footed game, the fish and the turtles eat and use the earth purely by instinct. They have no knowledge of the nature of the earth and the sky, and they therefore cannot be held accountable for their theft of resources. Man, on the other hand, differs from them. He is able to know the consequences that his behavior has upon his environment, and the price paid by nature for his greed for things. Each one of the things of the earth that man appropriates, use or misuse, is a product that took billions of years to make, ages of ages during which the particles composing them have traveled throughout the universe and have been shaped by stars and galaxies before being taken by the hand of man. The drops of rain watering his crops or quenching his thirst were al-

³⁵ Original Chinese text from: Liezi. *Liezi: Bilingual Edition, English and Chinese*. Trans. by Lionel Giles, Dragon Reader, 2015. np. The translation is based on the one made by Lionel Giles in the same book, but it has been modified to better fit the present work (Ch. 49).

ready there at the inception of the earth and the sky, and they passed through eons before they were lifted by the winds and carried over his field. Long before man stepped foot upon the face of the earth, this water had already been prepared by nature itself. How impudent of man to think that these fruits of distant eras belong to him, simply because he happens to stand in their vicinity and can let them be absorbed by the earth he tilled, just for an infinitely small fraction of their course throughout the sky, following the way.

The mental vision of the course of the things of the earth should therefore, in principle, impart a sense of modesty into man, as he sees how much these things, as insignificant as they may appear, can reach the depths of time and space, that is, the confines of the sky, locations that will forever remain inaccessible to their own ego. He is like an ant that would think of itself as a king and the owner of a whole kingdom simply because it would be the only living being present in the royal palace.

Man's realization of his condition, as a thief of the earth and the sky, is nonetheless not meant to plunge him in a spiral of guilt and privation, one that would ultimately lead him to despair and death. It is part of his nature to be a thief of the earth, and to go against this nature would be to go against the way itself. What the man embracing the way is meant to do is incredibly simple, and yet so hard to practice. In the words of Zhuangzi:

藏金于山，藏珠于淵；
不利貨財，不近貴富。

“He lets gold lie buried in the mountains
and lets the pearls lie hidden in the abyss.
He does not crave for property and wealth
and does not strive for fame and position.”³⁶

According to appearances, the life of the sage does not stand out from the one of the common folks. According to the standards of the world, he is not successful. He is not rich. He does not have a

³⁶ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 175. English translation based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 176, but modified to better fit the present work.

good reputation. Having chosen the likeness of water, falling from the highest clouds and then running from the snowy peaks to the deepest parts of the valleys and the darkest caves, he accompanies the lowest of men, those who are despised by the chasers of things and ignored by the powerful. The mountains are his storehouses, and the abyss are his vaults. He has everything that he needs within his dominion, whose boundaries are the borders of the earth and the sky. Whenever he needs something from the earth, he takes it from the lower realm, but his heart is not set on the riches found in its depths. Having everything, without possessing any thing, he watches others spend their days and even their whole lives mining the earth for things that they do not need. Unconcerned, without anger nor disdain, he watches their work, their pillaging of the earth, healing its wounds when he is able but not waging a battle against his neighbors, as he knows that the earth has the all-encompassing sky as its ally, and that its course will ultimately mend the scars on its body, filling where there is a lack and taking away where there is excess.

A careful observation of the course of the things of the earth allows an unveiling of the nature of the earth and of the place that man occupies on it. Unfortunately, this place may not be the one that man would expect, having a high opinion of himself. As the only creature roaming the earth that has been endowed with a consciousness of the course of nature itself, contrary to the multitude of other animals, he would naturally think that nature has offered him a place of choice, an exalted position that would be a reflection of his intellectual and spiritual superiority over other forms of life. He may nonetheless come to face a more troubling reality: the fact that if he stands out from other beings, and from the earth itself, it is also because of his capacity to lay waste on the earth, to disturb and stir up the flow of nature, and to go against the way. In the *Blue Cliff Record*, the Chan monk Yunmen (雲門) asks the following question:

藥病相治，盡大地是藥，那個是自己？

“Medicine and disease subdue each other:

the whole earth is medicine; what is your self?”³⁷

³⁷ Original Chinese text from: 吳平, 《新譯碧巖集 (上)》, p. 896. English

The monk would here seem to point out the noxious nature of man's ego, which is hurtful to the earth. The range of the statement that it contains may nonetheless be enlarged to be applied to mankind as a whole. The sum of all the egos of all men may be what best represents the essence of mankind, and therefore man himself may be seen as a disease whose cure is the earth itself. He would therefore not be the crown jewel of the creation, the apex of life, and the culmination of billions of years of work of the earth, but rather something infecting it, an ailment hindering its course, lacerating its body and consuming its flesh.

It is because man is a slave to his ego that he becomes a disease to the earth, but it is also this ego that defines him as a human being. If the flow of nature led to the emergence of man out of the earth itself, it implies that man is also fully part of nature. He can oppose nature and go against the way, but this behavior, this ability, is also the product of nature itself. Man's *raison d'être* may perhaps be seen in the aforementioned quote: "medicine and disease subdue each other." The word translated as "subdue" (治³⁸) designates the action of regulating, governing something, and its ideogram shows a flow of water being contained to prevent flooding. This action is nonetheless not unidirectional: disease and medicine, man and earth, subdue *each other* (相治³⁹). The disease is therefore as necessary as the medicine. Man contributes, by his opposition to the earth, to the equilibrium between the forces at play in the flow of nature. Man always remains, willingly or unwittingly, an agent of the way. The sage, by his spiritual growth, compensates for the work of those fighting against the way. He therefore has a role to play, one that is complementary to the one of the slaves to their greed for the things of the earth, who also have their role to play. The embracer of the way must therefore search for his role and diligently play his part. He must find out what should he begin to do. The first of those is: letting go of the things of the earth.

translation from: Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 477 (87th case in the English translation; 90th case in the aforementioned Chinese edition).

³⁸ 【zhì】.

³⁹ 【xiāng zhì】.

1.5 The Release of the Things of the Earth

Man can spend a considerable amount of time to study the things of the earth and to examine the relationship, which is often a dependency, that he has with them. Grasping these things in his hands, he can observe them in detail, dissecting them with his eyes or with his mind, until the secrets that they conceal are all revealed. He can trace back their course over time and space, seeing how these things that he holds went through the entire course of the sky and the earth, passing through these ages long before life itself emerged from the earth and the seas. This work would nonetheless be vain if it does not bear fruits. It should lead to a transformation of man's daily life as well as of his very being.

If he has diligently observed the things that he holds and adequately reflected upon the nature of his relationship with them, he indeed should conclude that the relationship that he has with a large number of things of the earth is detrimental to his spiritual development, to the blossoming of his being. This is when the time for introspection and observation should end, and when the time for action, or re-action, should begin.

The vision of his dependency, and even of his slavery to the things of the earth, may produce a shock that will often make man react impulsively, stirring up his thoughts and clouding his judgment. The most natural reaction to the realization of one's condition as a slave would be to fight for freedom, violently and uncompromisingly. The slave to the things of the earth may therefore declare that these things are his enemies. He would then strive to cut off the bonds tying him to them and attempt to cast them away, throwing them as far as he is able. He may even decide to destroy the things that he sees as leading him astray from the path set for him, like the *bonfires of the vanities* of Girolamo Savonarola,⁴⁰ returning things to ashes and to the earth itself. This is the way of the ascetic, which has been followed by a great number of men since the dawn of mankind, on each continent and in very different religious traditions. Rejecting the things of the earth, they are warriors of the mind against matter, soldiers of the sky fighting

⁴⁰ Savonarola encouraged the people to throw away the superfluous things that they possessed in large bonfires, thereby delivering them from the vanity of non-essential material possessions.

to vanquish the earth, even at the risk of destroying themselves, whose body is made out of it.

The man at war with the things of the earth is therefore often also a man waging a battle against the earth itself. The ascetic does not see the creation as an indivisible whole: the separation between earth and sky to him is not a mere convention, product of man's world, it rather reflects an underlying truth, a fundamental difference and opposition between them. The earthly is seen as low, vulgar, and immature, while the heavenly represents what is exalted, superior, and spiritual. Wanting to transcend his earthly nature to become a lord of the sky, an ethereal being, he denies his own flesh, rejects his own body, which he sees as a deadweight hindering his growth and preventing him from soaring toward the heavens. His body, as part of the earth, itself becomes man's enemy and it is treated accordingly. The needs of the body are ignored by the mind, as much as man's will allows it. It is denied food and water, leaving it unsatisfied on purpose, crying to man's heart for its sustenance. It is denied sufficient sleep, seen as a doorway to laziness and to a general lack of discipline of the mind over the body. It may even be burned by hot coals, slashed with a whip, or pushed to the brink of death in freezing waters, all of this by man's own hand, flesh hurting itself to attempt to cleave the mind away from the body, to tear the sky away from the earth. The most extreme forms of asceticism may even lead a man to voluntarily throw away his body as a whole, embracing death as the ultimate way to vanquish his earthly nature, believing that the essence of his being, his "soul," would thereby be liberated, like the Greek philosopher Empedocles, who threw himself in an erupting volcano to free himself from his flesh.

To wage war against the earth is not only to fight against one's being, it is also a strife against the way of the sky, nature itself. The ox does not starve itself to transcend its earthly nature. The mountains do not try to float in the air. The fish do not pretend that they can fly. To accept one's own nature is the first step that has to be taken by someone who wishes to embrace the way of the sky. Man's nature is a reflection of the relationship between earth and sky: he is himself both a creature of the earth, made of flesh and blood, and one of the sky, able to use his mind to reach out toward the things of the sky, spiritual matters that go beyond mere materiality. To embrace the way of the sky therefore

implies a balance between man's earthly and heavenly natures, a symbiosis between his body and his mind, which are inextricably tied to one another.

Man's world is built upon the earth. All the things that his mind produces are the fruit of his sensory experience of the earth and the sky, even if his world extends beyond the sensory and forms a space that in a way transcends both earth and sky: the metaphysical. The physical realm: the earth, the sky, and the parts of man's world formed from them, therefore represents more than the ground upon which he stands: it is the foundation of everything that he *has*, *uses*, or *thinks about*. It is what allows him to be, and what he is made of. How can it then be considered as an enemy to be destroyed and discarded? This goes against man's nature, and against nature itself.

To satisfy the basic needs of the body is to embrace the way of the sky, and so is the satisfaction of the needs of the mind. To do so is to contribute to the balance between the earth and the sky on the one end, and the non-earthly parts of the world on the other, that is, the balance between the physical-temporal realm and the metaphysical one. Each man indeed represents a microcosm that reflects the larger structure of mankind: at his own scale, he has the power to balance the realms and the sum of all the surpluses or lacks of all men also represents a larger play of power between the realms, which is also constrained by the way of the sky itself.

If asceticism, that is, the rejection of the things of the earth, including the body itself, goes against the way of the sky, as does the lust for these very things, their possession, and their misuse, what kind of relationship is the man embracing the way supposed to have with the things of the earth? Fortunately, man is not alone on his walk along the way. His forefathers have pondered the same questions, generation after generation, and some of them have left imprints of their reflections carved on turtle shells, bamboo slips, and paper, or simply transmitted their teachings from mouth to ear. The core teaching of the Chinese Chan tradition concerning one's relationship with things, of the earth first, but also those of the world and the sky, is concise and disconcertingly simple:

切勿執著。

“Do not be attached / Do not grasp (without letting go).”⁴¹

These four ideograms give us a straightforward command, which may appear simplistic and naive but requires an explanation and is incredibly hard to effectively put into practice. To grasp a thing of the earth is to use one’s fingers to seize control of it and prevent it from being taken away. It represents one of the most fundamental ways by which man possesses things, and certainly the one that is the most characteristic of mankind. Other living beings possess things mostly by ingesting and digesting them, but man can seize and manipulate them. There nonetheless is an important difference between these two means of possessing a “thing:” when one ingests something, it is mainly to satisfy one’s hunger or thirst, whereas the grasping of objects is not directly linked to a need. One can continue to eat or drink to a certain measure even when one has his fill, but the body itself can put a stop to it. Grasping, on the other hand, knows no boundaries. It can be used to hold weapons during a hunt, or to fashion tools that will allow him to build a house or to weave cloth. Grasping is therefore necessary for man’s survival, but only when it is tied to a use.

When what has been grasped has fulfilled its purpose, it can be returned to its original place. If one holds on to it and stands idle, this is when the use gives places to an abuse, when the tool becomes a fetish. This is the moment when a reversal occurs: the object begins to take hold of the one holding it. What is grasped begins to seize man’s hand and his heart, binding him to itself and not letting go. Such an image can be found depicted in the very ideogram that was translated as “grasp” in the aforementioned quote: 執,⁴² which originally represented a pair of hands held in handcuffs. The grasping of the hand easily becomes an attachment of the heart, and then handcuffs of iron. The things of the earth can therefore entrap man, making him believe that his hands give

⁴¹ Traditional saying; The word 執著【zhí zhuó】 is more commonly used in the sense of “to be obstinate” in modern Chinese, but its use in the context of Chan is more peculiar, closer to the concepts of attachment and grasping while refusing to let go.

⁴² 【zhí】.

切勿執著

him power over things, while he remains oblivious to the fact that they can just as well lead him to relinquish his control of himself.

The things of earth are therefore like hot pieces of metal, which can be manipulated without injury if one is fast enough and minimizes his contact with them, but they consume him if they are left in his hands for too long, without being used. Man must therefore learn to use without abuse, to seize and to let go, letting the thing fulfill its purpose without letting it rapture his heart, an art that takes a lifetime to master. Before this can happen, he nonetheless must first learn how to let go, how to release the things of the earth, which incidentally also represents his own release from their grip, his liberation.

When someone wants to cease from holding an object in his hands, he must first release the tension that has been created by his muscles and his bones. It is this tension that allowed the grasping of the thing, through a rigidification of the hand, like the legs of a spider taking hold of a prey. The release of the thing thus comes as a result of a relaxation of the hand, a softening of the muscles in the hands and arms, a liquefying of the body. When the body takes the likeness of water, having released all the tensions that made it appear hard and rigid, it can no longer control and possess. Like a stream of water flowing down a valley, the relaxed man does not keep anything that is not maintained close to him by the other forces of nature, the earth in particular. As a water-tight pouch, his skin prevents the dissolution of his flesh and the spilling of his blood, which is eager to join back the great body of the earth as soon as it is given the opportunity to do so. His clothes are kept in place by the conjunction of the downward pull of the earth and their particular shape, chosen so that they would not escape the one wearing them, even when he does not hold on to them. In a perfectly relaxed state, he may begin to pay attention to the streams near him, listening to their voices, to what they sing as they run down toward the sea. This is when he may begin to learn the art of the release of things and notice the great stream that is invisible in itself and yet directs every single thing that he can see with his own eyes and feel with his hands.

The release of the things of the earth starts where their grasping and possession began, in the hand, but it does not end there. The wave of release must be unleashed so that it would engulf the

entire realm of man's possessions. The door of his house should be unlocked; the chains of his fence should be unfastened. His vaults should be left open, and the key to his drawers thrown away. Then can the stream of things of the earth flow through his own home, both bringing and taking things according to the needs and greed of the other men living nearby. Here also, an equilibrium must nonetheless be found. The release of all things is an ideal, which must be confronted with a less than ideal reality. Man still has needs that must be fulfilled in order for him to live. He cannot leave thieves empty his pantry before the winter comes, or let his children be taken away to be sold as slaves. When hard times come, safety is not only a need, it becomes a right and a responsibility.

Once again, a balance must be found, far from two forms of extremism: firstly, the one that denies man's need for things in order to survive and demands that he reject things altogether, and secondly the one that considers that the possession of an always greater number of things is a way of life leading to contentment. Man can build a house without letting it become his own prison. He can securely lock his pantry without being chained to it. The key is to realize that the danger is not the things themselves, but rather the power that they exert on man's heart. The release of the things themselves is often the fastest and easiest path, as the discarding of an object, in most cases, greatly reduces its grip on man. Far from the eyes and the hands, far from the heart. The less one has, the freer can one be.

There is nonetheless also a possibility of releasing the things that are indispensable to man's life: cutting off the bond while keeping the thing at hand. What matters is not so much the fact that one's hand clutches a thing, that one's house has high walls and fortified doors, or that one keeps precious things in inviolable chambers itself, but rather the strength of the bond between man and thing. The clutched hand, the doors, and the chambers are only symptoms of the disease, which is the enslavement of man to things of the earth, but the relationship between the two is not one of direct cause and consequence. A man can have nothing at hand and be smothered by the chains binding him to things that he does not have, and one can live surrounded by things, even bearing them on one's neck, without being attached to them. The release of the things of the earth is therefore more than a question of possession of material objects: it begins and ends in man's heart

rather than in his hands.

Giving things away is the easiest path. It is the first step of the beginner. To get rid of the superfluous, to declutter, is a rather simple thing, but to be able to cut off the bonds with the necessary is another matter. It demands that man lets himself be more deeply permeated by the way of the sky, letting go of the grip he has on his own self first, and then on life itself. It is only by letting go of his desire to survive that man cuts off the bond chaining him to the things that are necessary for his survival. To release his grip on life nonetheless does not imply that he is embracing death, but only that he fully accepts to let himself be carried along the way by the flow of nature. He may prepare food for the winter, and he may forge weapons to protect his children, but placing his life in the hands of fate, he would not be devastated if fate goes against what he had planned. Having severed the chains tying him to his possessions, to his wife and children, and even to his own life, he is prepared to face the fact that these things are all transient, passing by as they are carried by the flow. These chains were sources of fear and worries, but once they have been destroyed, man is free: free to live, to enjoy, and to die, embracing the way and the things around him, embracing without smothering, until he let himself be dissolved, content and one with the earth.

The release of the things of the earth is not a one-time event. It is a process that can take many years to complete, and many return to the earth before its completion. The most important nonetheless remains the impulse at its origin: the moment when one realizes the need for the release itself. This is when man is called to transform his own life, his own being, to shape it according to the way. This is when man ceases to attempt to fashion the earth and the world in his image and to make it fit his desires, and when he submits himself to the way of the sky. When the bondage to the things of the earth ends and the slave is finally free, he is then given the opportunity to see his place in the creation, the fact that the liberation from the things of the earth does not imply that he now would be master of all things, and even simply master over himself.

It is after having been held prisoner in a dark cell, after having forgotten the daily play of light and darkness, when the sun comes

in and out of the horizon, that man is in the best condition to be touched and seized by the greatness of the sky. When he has finally been liberated, his chains crushed to dust, he can see that other, greater forces still exert a strong influence upon him, constraining his life. Is he still a prisoner? Has he only escaped a cell to find himself still locked in a larger prison? He indeed is enclosed inside a restricted space, and time: the sky itself is his shelter, one whose boundaries will forever remain inaccessible to him. He is also kept close to the great body of the earth by its gravitational pull. Earth and sky keep him under their influence, but their yoke is nevertheless fundamentally different from the condition he experienced as a slave to the things of the earth. Both play with him rather than put him in chains. They both constrain his movements and his nature, but they also are what allow him to exist in the first place: the earth gave him his body, and the sky a space and time in which this existence can be manifested.

Having released the things of the earth but seeing himself under the influence of the earth and the sky, which gave birth to him, man is then in a perfect condition to realize that he can willingly submit to these greater forces, which themselves follow another: the way itself. The lines between slavery and freedom, liberation and submission are therefore blurred. He is not bound in chains, only gently pushed and pulled, delicately carried by the flow of nature, which like a stream of water can carry and move without grasping. Neither entirely free, nor a slave, he is only searching for harmony with the forces interacting with him.

The manner in which the earth and the sky interact with man can therefore become a model for man's relationship with the things of the earth. Using without grasping, close but without being chained to each other, this is how he can live without becoming a slave to the things he needs for his survival. The Chinese Chan tradition has a saying that echoes with this question, in the form of a precept to guide the life of the follower of the way:

可遇不可求。

“It can be encountered, but cannot be sought after.”⁴³

⁴³ Traditional saying.

可遇不可求

This short statement remarkably characterizes what man's relationship with the things of the earth is supposed to be, in addition to crystallizing the essence of the life of an embracer of the way. To seek is very similar to a act of possession. It implies an attraction between the seeker and what is sought, a desire to obtain that betrays a subjection of man to the thing he covets. By searching, he loses himself, loses his freedom, as it is the "thing" that decides where he will go, and what he must do to obtain it. He follows the thing, which becomes his leader, and even if he does not possess a single thing of the earth, he once again becomes a slave to them, by another means.

The slave searches for his master, while the master waits for things to come to him. The free man, the embracer of the way, is neither slave nor master. He refuses the two roles that only represent two sides of the same coin. The master, owning slaves or things, indeed quickly becomes dependent on what he possesses. He is chained to them and thinks that these chains allow him to prevent his property from running or being taken away, but what is found at the two extremities can hardly be distinguished. The slave also holds the master in chains, and this is why the free man rejects them altogether.

The free man rejects the fetters binding him to things, but this is not done to keep them at bay from him. On the contrary, it is by being free from them that he can develop a true relationship with these things, one that reflects the nature of the way: strong but soft, like water, accompanying without controlling. He does not seek, and he does not possess. He does not desire, and does not expect, as if things were due to him. He rather waits, patiently and placidly, without awaiting any thing or anything. This tranquility and freedom teach him about the way, opening his eyes and his ears to the signs of the earth and the sky, awaking his senses to the presence of the things that are around him, from the smallest speck of dust to the widest clouds that hover above his head. He is slowly prepared, his heart kneaded like dough, by the way itself, until he is ready to welcome the things that are coming to him, without them being expected, sought, or caught.

Once the things of the earth have been released and the desire for these things has been quenched, what is the free man then supposed to do? How is he supposed to live? Is he meant to stay

still, contemplating the flow of nature while waiting for it to bring him what he needs directly into his hands? Obviously, it is not that simple. He should wait for the encounter with what he needs, without awaiting it. This nonetheless does not imply inaction. Tranquility does not require idleness or motionlessness. He can wander the land without seeking. He can take without grasping, and he can be close to a thing without possessing it. What he can do is to pave the way for things, to facilitate an encounter with the things he needs: people, food, shelter, warmth. Aimlessly walking through the country, he will sooner or later stumble upon some sort of food. Fruits hanging on branches, berries hidden in bushes, or mushrooms on damp wood lying on the soil of the forest, he is also certain to find what he needs. A cave, an abandoned house, or an old car left to be reclaimed by the earth can provide him with shelter from the wrath of the sky and the coldness of the earth. The skin of a deer or a bison, dead of old age or killed by the teeth of a predator, could give him warmth when the sun hides its face under the horizon.

The earth and the sky provide to those who are patient, those who can hear their voice and listen to their teachings. Man is truly free when he accepts to let himself be supported by the earth and to let the winds of the sky insufflate the breath of life that prolongs his existence into him, that is, when he embraces the way and puts his trust in it. This nonetheless does not mean that to have faith in the way and to let himself carried by the flow of nature implies that man will never lack anything, or even that he will live until his body crumbles from old age. Wandering throughout the countryside, waiting to stumble upon some food, is not a fail-safe method of survival, far from it. Someone relying on his trust in nature to survive a harsh winter or live in a land ravaged with drought can expect to be confronted with death, his own or the one of those depending on him.

The way is never perfectly straight. It always takes turns and detours. It is never simple nor simplistic, but rather always demands a continuous balance, an equilibrium between opposing forces that are both necessary in order for it to continue to *be*. A release is not an abandonment nor a rejection, and the life of the free man is a permanent balance between the embracing of life and the embracing of death, between the self and the whole. Relinquishing his desire for survival, for existence, by putting his

trust in the way, he may welcome death, or at least grow indifferent to it. Like a swallow that wanders around the city, eating the crumbs falling on the ground, but that is swept away by the first snowstorm, he may accept his fate, the fact that nature will not always provide and that the moment when it happens may mark the end of his days above the surface of the earth, the time to return to the great below.

Man is nonetheless different than a swallow. His hands and his mind allow him to plan ahead, to devise strategies to ensure that he would be able to face dangers threatening his own life. To obey his instinct for survival does not necessarily go against the way, and conversely, to embrace death does not naturally represent a following of the way. The prescription to wait for an encounter rather than to seek things is not a dogma or a divine law. It is meant to lead man to a liberation from the bondage of the things of the earth, but it would become pointless if man would simply be led to a quick death by it. Through the release, man is called to turn himself toward life, without fear of death. He therefore must do what he is meant to do to live but without letting himself be enslaved by his desire to survive. Accepting the need for death, he can continue to live for as long as he can, feeding himself, building shelters, and weaving clothes without guilt, seeking when necessary, occasionally storing things. He waits for death without awaiting it, free from both the desire to live and the fear of death.

The free man thus prefers to wait rather than to seek, even though he can at times judge the latter preferable. This should nonetheless not lead us to believe that the reception of things of the earth offered by nature itself would be the best that could happen to him. Another Chan saying, found in the *Compendium of the Five Lamps* (五燈會元), tells us what is more desirable:

好事不如無。
“No-thing is better than a good thing.”⁴⁴

The translation of this sentence is somewhat delicate, as the word translated here as “no-thing” (無⁴⁵) can be interpreted in

⁴⁴ Chinese text from Wikisource (五燈會元卷四). TBA.

⁴⁵ 【wú】.

好事不如無

different manners. It mainly designates the absence of things, an emptiness, or more exactly, the opposite of the word “being” (有⁴⁶). It is both “nothingness” and “no thing;” both a concept for what *is* when no “thing” is there, and the absence of things in itself. Different layers of meaning of this saying will therefore have to be unfolded.

A slave to things eagerly tries to obtain good things, which are things that not only satisfy his most basic needs but rather fulfill, momentarily at least, the cravings of his ego and his senses. For him, to have none of what he wishes for is preferable than for nature or men to indulge in his every whim. Frustration can become a means to teach him frugality and perhaps show him the blessing of knowing what is enough. The pursuit of good things is only a race that never ends, as the good quickly becomes dull when one grows accustomed to it, forcing the slave to seek things that are increasingly harder to find and to obtain. The man content with the mere fact of being alive, on the other hand, can rest and contemplate. The less he has, the less he is burdened, and once he has nothing, he is finally free. How fortunate the man with none! When the good is detrimental to man’s life, the poor are rich indeed.

A second interpretation of the aforementioned sentence may read it as saying that an encounter with “nothingness” is better than to receive any other good thing of the earth and the world. It is not the fact that he has none that is good for him, but rather the fact that when all has been thrown or taken away, he must confront what is left: the very concept of “nothingness,” “emptiness,” a void that through man’s mind itself becomes a “thing,” a concept that can be thought upon. This can be compared to the appearance of the symbol for the zero in mathematics, which embodies an absence, representing “nothingness” by something.

What is this “nothingness” (無), if it is more than an absence of things? A hint at the way the Ancient Chinese first saw this concept may perhaps be found in the origin of the ideogram itself:

⁴⁶ 【yǒu】.



To represent “nothingness” or the absence of things by a miniature drawing represents a challenge, as the most natural representation, a void space, is not an option, for practical reasons. According to the most generally accepted interpretation, this ideogram would represent a person dancing (linked with the ideogram for “dance”: 舞⁴⁷), having long sleeves and holding some undetermined objects in both hands. No explanation is generally given concerning the link between this drawing and the meaning of the word.

No matter whether or not this would indeed represent the original meaning of the drawing, another interpretation may be proposed, one that would shed a somewhat brighter light on the concept of “nothingness.” It may be seen as someone carrying away things, thereby not representing an emptiness itself, but rather an action that leads to it, something preceding it. Nothingness is what remains when every “thing” has been taken away, transported far away until they cannot be seen nor felt.

When it concerns material things, the concept of emptiness designates an absence of any thing of the earth. Even when all the things of the earth have vanished, something nonetheless always remains, something that represents the very basis of the earth itself: the space, including time as one of its dimensions, that the earth can occupy. The abyss uncovered by the disappearance of the earth is the boundless extent that is already present above his head. The abyss is indeed the essence of the sky itself, the foundation and basis of the earth, the support of all things that ever were, are, and will be. Nothingness precedes all, supports all, and it represents the shelter of being itself.

The essence of being is unveiled by the concealment of all the things of the earth, because this concealment finally reveals the source of all things and the nature of both the earth and the sky.

⁴⁷ 【wǔ】.

The earth is fullness, “things,” materiality. The sky is emptiness, void, an expense that allows the earth to have an extension.⁴⁸ The latter allows the former, but the sky gets its purpose and brilliance through the agency of the earth. No meaning or vision could indeed arise in an empty space-time, one without matter. Earth and sky are unequal but complementary, and it is when man has released all the things of the earth that he can finally face the essence of being: the abyss that allows all being, which is “nothingness” encountered as a “thing.”

Once nothingness enters man’s world, when he begins to perceive it through the paradox of its existence, its nature can finally shine into his eyes. Nothingness, the abyss, is the frame of the whole of nature. The whole formed by the earth and the sky can be contrasted with nothingness. The two complement each other, in the same way that the earth complements the sky; that matter complements space and time. The encounter with nothingness, through the release of the things of the earth, offers a new opportunity to embrace the whole and to become aware of the permanent play at work between nothingness and the whole, mirroring the one between earth and sky.

The last step of the release, the fruit of the encounter with the nothingness that is better than the best things of the earth and the world, is to depart from one’s prison, to leave all things behind, severing not only one’s bond with the things of the earth that one acquired, but also to cut off one’s very roots. A synthesis of this action may be seen in a single Chinese word, one that is very commonly used, even today, but in a rather narrow sense:

出家
 “To depart from home / To become a monk.”

To leave the home implies a dual severance. The first is a separation from the earthly house that shelters a man, often from the time he was born onto the earth. It is to leave the safety that it offers to venture out in the open country, where the things around are not kept for oneself between four walls, and where they are

⁴⁸ The word “extension” is here meant in the philosophical sense of “occupying a portion of space and time.”

not possessed. The home is indeed the space of possession, the place where one can accumulate things of the earth without fear of them being taken back by the earth itself or by the hand of other men. Such a departure may come as the result of the release of the things found within the home: once these things have been discarded, or the bond with them cut off, the home may then be seen as obsolete. The shelter of things becomes meaningless once there is no thing left to shelter. Useless, and a thing of the earth in itself, the home is the last thing to release.

The home is something that possesses man, as it is something that he owns and cherishes, and with which he has developed emotional ties. What man needs is a house to protect himself from the rage of the skies, not a home. The distinction between the two is clear: a house is interchangeable. It is a secluded place in which one can find cover, warmth, and safety. A home, on the other hand, by definition implies possession, familiarity, and intimacy. A home is a house to which one is attached, a house that possesses man, enrapturing his heart while providing him with a sense of security. The departure from the home therefore only implies a severance of the bond tying him to it rather than its abandonment. A man may indeed remain in the same place, transforming the home into a mere house, but it is still easier for him to simply depart from the place itself.

The home is nonetheless often more than a shelter toward which one has developed an attachment. Few men grow up without the company of other men and women sharing blood-ties with them, who are part of the home. Together, those living together become a “house,” a family (家庭⁴⁹ in Chinese, a word whose first ideogram is the one designating a physical house: 家⁵⁰), and each one of those inhabiting the home inevitably develop bonds with the others, bonds which are both physical and affective. A true departure from the home, which traditionally took the form of becoming a monk in a Buddhist monastery, therefore also implies a separation, physical and spiritual, from one’s family. It meant that one would renounce his family name, his titles, and his right of inheritance. It is a cutting-off from the home, from the house in which a man was born and of the blood-ties linking him with

⁴⁹ 【jiā tíng】.

⁵⁰ 【jiā】.

his parents and brethren.

The departure from the home is the last step of the release of the things of the earth, which also includes a release of some worldly ties, the ones with the family. Once all the things have been released, it is the inhabitant who must release himself from the home which was also a prison keeping him away from the open country, from the oneness of the earth and the sky, the whole that was invisible to him, hidden by its walls and its roof. The release is indeed more than a teaching, more than a spiritual exercise: it is meant to be an impulse leading to a radical transformation of one's life, as a whole, from its most important aspects to the most ordinary acts of one's daily life.

The man who is considered to be the “founder” of the Chan movement in China, the Indian monk Bodhidharma, is said to have declared in one the treatises attributed to him: “the departure and distancing from birth and death is called a departure from home” (出離生死名出家).⁵¹ Birth and death are the two boundaries of any form of life. To distance oneself from these boundaries could mean that one is renouncing to his *own* life, to embrace *being* itself, that is, that he dissolves his own ego in the whole of the creation. Transcending the temporal boundaries, birth and death, his existence becomes *being*, outside of the constraints of space and time, one with the sky that encompasses all. This, of course, remains an ideal, a distancing and not a severance, as man's ego is a fire so deeply entrenched in man's life that it can never be entirely quenched, and he would cease to be a man if it were to happen.

Another possibility, another reading, would be to see birth and death as the two distant horizons of man's life. To take distance as much as possible from the dawn of one's being as well as from its dusk, from the most distant past and the most remote future at the same time implies that one is entirely focused on the present. The result may be somewhat similar to the previous hypothesis: absolute *presence*, the vanishing of the horizon of time from one's consciousness, represents an obsolescence of the

⁵¹ TBA. The translation is overly literal on purpose. A more classic translation would be: “To separate oneself from birth and death is called to become a monk.” Original Chinese text from: 蔡志忠. 《蔡志忠漫画中国传统文化经典：达摩禅（中英文对照版）》. 中国出版集团, 2016. P. 106.

concept of time itself, and what remains is once again the whole, the all-encompassing sky that embraces and shelters all things. To conceal birth and death from one's view is therefore the same as to take distance from them. This is man's release from the boundaries of his existence and of his ego, when he can finally discover his being, the present, under a new light, and let this newfound freedom shape every one of his actions and thoughts, even the most ordinary, the ones that are considered the least elevated, the least noble and spiritual. The present now becomes a play, in which every single thing of the earth assume an essential role.

1.6 Playing with the Things of the Earth

Once man has found in himself the strength to let go, to release the things of the earth that he held dear, to which he was attached and which he served as a slave serves his master, he enters a new life, one that will demand of him that he learn new ways to interact with the things surrounding him. Indeed, many of the things that have been released will still be part of his life. The chains binding man to them may have been reduced to pieces, but these things remain, and he will still need many of them in order to continue to live above the surface of the earth. Free from things but still surrounded by them, he must therefore dis-cover them anew and try to see what kind of relationship can he develop with them, while avoiding finding himself ensnared again by attachments.

To lead a life that is a living manifestation of the way (道⁵²), man must cultivate his virtue (德⁵³), shaping his self and his behavior so that he can himself become an agent of the way. Regarding the things of the earth, such a virtue would imply close contact, touching without grasping, using without abusing, and accompanying without possessing. The virtuous man, the embracer of the way, does not manipulate things. He does not acquire them and does not hold on to them. What he does is simply to play with them, treating these things without violence, without anger, trying to seduce rather than to coerce.

Playing implies mutual enjoyment, something that contrasts with the master-slave relationship between possessors and possessed, users and used. Such enjoyment in the play occurs when the players treat each other with respect, seeing themselves as equals in the sight of nature itself, ignoring hierarchies that may nonetheless still exist. It does not matter that the things of the earth with which he plays have no consciousness, that they are inanimate things that cannot take an active part in the play by themselves, because they are parts of the whole of nature, which is itself guided by the way. Playing with these things, man is only performing a dance with nature itself, following the lead of the way and embracing it, without holding on to it. To treat the parts with the respect that is due to the whole, this is the foundation

⁵² 【dào】.

⁵³ 【dé】.

and the beginning of the play with the things of the earth.

If one has a clear view of the way, he can see the whole of the earth in each one of the things that are made of it. Stumbling upon a piece of dead wood, softened by the rain and dried up by the sun after months of exposure, he does not merely see it as a log, something that can give him warmth and help him cook a meal if thrown into the fireplace inside his house. He sees the course of this thing, which arose from the earth as a part of a branch of a tree, slowly growing thicker over many years, before being separated, broken, falling onto the ground, and then becoming a thing by itself, distinct from the lifeform at its source. He sees the earth from which it was shaped and to which it will soon return, transformed into ashes by fire and then going back to the depths of the ground through the agency of the water poured down from the clouds. He sees that the things of the earth are transient, but also that what they are part of, the earth itself, nonetheless remains, unchanged and permanent. This vision of the nature of the thing invites him to treat this piece of wood as more than an object, to be used and discarded. The way he behaves toward this seemingly insignificant “thing” will now become a trial, a reflection of his attitude toward the whole of the earth and of his following of the way.

Stumbling upon the piece of wood, the embracer of the way is offered an opportunity to play with it, and thereby to play with the earth as a whole. Without reflection, without worrying, as this would imply a form of spiritual attachment and go against the way, he is called to enter into contact with this thing, which is now also a player. Approaching it without tracking it, touching without grasping, his hands are lifting it up, as if he was holding a sacred vessel. Treating it with the utmost respect due to the earth itself, but without fear or awe, which would indicate a hierarchy between players, the thing is a partner with whom he is playing, playing a game that gives meaning to his own being and makes him a conscious agent of the way. Taken in his arms, the thing is carried as an offering: it is indeed not something that man simply takes away from the earth, but rather a gift. The earth offering this gift always watches over man, and the recipient of the gift therefore treats it as if he stood in front of a person giving it to him personally. It is not carelessly thrown into the back of a chariot or over a pile of junk outside his house: it is rather handled

with care and placed somewhere reflecting the respect that he feels toward the one who offered it.

The attention and care expressed toward the whole are constantly but naturally balanced with the detachment toward all things befitting a follower of the way. This balance is itself a reflection of one of the most fundamental aspects of the way, which is thus described by the Chinese philosopher:

道常無為而無不為。
 “The way never does anything,
 yet through it all things are done.”⁵⁴

Here is found one of the central concepts of the philosophy of the way: the concept of 無為 (【wú wéi】), often translated as “inaction.” The philosopher’s quote itself points out the paradoxical nature of the relationship between the way and such an “inaction:” the way succeeds in doing everything, while remaining “inactive.” The contradiction is nonetheless only apparent. The 無為 (【wú wéi】) indeed does not designate the fact of not performing any action, but rather implies that what is done is done without a goal, without a will to do something determinate, and this is the attitude that reflects how all things are done in accordance with the way. This is the attitude that its follower should emulate.

When the follower enters into contact with things of the earth, his will should be dulled to the point that it would not matter to him if those things were to vanish instantly from the face of the earth and from his hands. He may carry a piece of wood when he has need for it, following his instinct or the voice of his flesh crying for warmth or food. He may use this thing of the earth to kindle a fire that will calm the tremors of his body induced by the cold breeze blown into his shelter, but this action is not the result of his own will and he does not take it to heart: he only lets himself be guided by the signals coming from his flesh, the needs of his body, and from nature itself. He “does things”, but passively, letting himself be led by the way rather than by his own will, his own ego. He lets himself become an instrument of the way, through which

⁵⁴ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 70. TBA. (Ch. 37).

actions are performed, but without him taking an active part in it.

Adopting such an “inactive” attitude toward things, the follower of the way can live his days in harmony with the whole. He lets himself be carried by the flow of nature, and everything he does is done with the whole in mind, while the peculiarities of the parts are overlooked. The care shown to the things of the earth does not mark an attachment to them in themselves, but only respect for what they are part of. He treats these things as if they were precious objects, gifts of the earth, but he nonetheless would not care at all if these things were taken away or destroyed by the flow of nature, as these parts of the earth are only transient manifestations, continuously coming out of the body of the earth and sooner or later always returning to it.

The embracer of the way therefore is “inactive” but not an ascetic, living a life of contemplation of nature, ignoring the needs of his body or the needs of others. He can walk or run to find the water and food that would quench the thirst of his throat and the hunger of his belly. He can gather and cut stones to build a house that will protect him from the rage of the sky, and he can chop down and burn the trees surrounding him, without becoming a slave to his instincts. He can do so by becoming a player, playing with the things of the earth rather than possessing them. To play with things is to let himself be driven by the whole, by the way, rather than to try to be in control of them. The play is similar to a dance, where two partners move together without anyone leading the other, and with both of them continuously adapting their movement in reaction to the movement of the partner. The player can thereby “do anything” while remaining “inactive,” letting his will be subjugated to the flow of all the things around him, listening to nature rather than to his ego.

Dispossessing himself of his own will, becoming “inactive” while living a life that does not appear to significantly differ from the one of those who go against the way or are simply oblivious to it, may nonetheless not be entirely sufficient to live according to the way. The Chinese Chan tradition gives us another characteristic of the way, in addition to its “inactivity”:

無心是道。
 “The way has no heart/mind”⁵⁵

The Chinese word for “heart” has a slightly different meaning than its English counterpart. It is not the seat of compassion or love, but rather the one of emotions and attachment. The expression 無心 **【wú xīn】** therefore does not designate someone who is “heartless,” but someone who doesn’t “take things to heart,” someone who does not feel strongly about anything or any thing.

The aforementioned statement thus tells us that the way takes nothing to heart. It knows no joy when it is followed, and no pain when men go against it. It simply guides the flow of nature, impassive, passionless, but always remaining the strongest force of the creation. The way is like a channel carved by the ages from the peak of a mountain to the deepest parts of a valley, guiding streams of water running down to the sea, deciding of their course at every turn, without any form of judgment concerning the path that is taken. The path always goes through the lowest point, the one that demands the less efforts. There are no good or bad routes, only the one that is the most natural. The path will at times be wide and flat, leading the water to become clear and almost stagnant, but it will also lead it to chasms that will form waterfalls or funnel it through narrow gates that will cause it to be transformed into an uncontrollable, murky torrent. The way guides the flow of nature in such a manner, giving a frame to the creation, but without judgment and without emotions. The way does not cry when it leads men to the grave by millions, and it does not rejoice when men work to protect the earth, or life itself. The way does not “care” whether it is embraced or rejected by men: it simply continues to guide the flow, which always wins over those who attempt to go against it.

According to the Chan tradition, a follower of the way should also emulate the way and not take things to heart. He should not feel too strongly about anything, and this for a very simple reason. Just like “possession” makes man a slave to what is possessed, and just like “actions” guided by one’s own will and ego bind the one performing them to what is endeavored or desired, taking things to

⁵⁵ Traditional saying.

heart, letting himself be ensnared by his own emotions, ineluctably leads him to develop new forms of attachment, to put on a new yoke on his neck that deprives him of his freedom.

In order to adequately play with the things of the earth, man needs to remain placid toward them. The dance between the players would quickly grow disharmonious if one of them were to let himself be controlled by his own emotions. The delicate balance provided by nature itself would be overpowered by the attachment or repulsion developed toward the thing, and the dance would give way to a struggle; the play would be replaced by a confrontation. In this regard, love can be just as noxious as hatred. The exaltation of one's heart produces the same result as its humiliation, and all that is left is chaos, the strengthening of the ego, and a weakening of the whole through a dislocation of the cohesion between the parts.

The placidity characterizing the embracer of the way is nonetheless far from something inaccessible. It is not a lofty metaphysical concept, fruit of the mind of philosophers who would have lost touch with the ground, with the earth itself. On the contrary, it is the result of the most intimate contact with the earth, and it is a source of light on the path of the follower, something very easily seen, even if it can be hard to follow. The following story, which is known, even now, by most people in China, well illustrates the difference between a man taking things too much to heart and someone free from attachments:

An old monk and his disciple were roaming throughout the countryside to receive alms, and as they were about to cross a river on foot, they encountered a young woman on the shore. The woman did not dare to cross the stream by herself, not wanting to let her long clothes be wet, and she therefore asked the monks to help her reach the other shore. The older monk accepted and took her on his back, and she thus crossed the river with her feet dry.

The disciple did not utter a word, and both continued their journey. After long hours of walk, the young man could not resist anymore and asked his teacher:

– “Master, how come did you accept to take this

young woman on your back to cross the river? Aren't monks supposed to refrain from entering into contact with women in such a manner?"

The master answered:

– “Ah, you mean, that woman! I let her go as soon as we reached the shore, but you, why are you still holding her? Let her go.”⁵⁶

The master transgressed the rule because he knew its purpose: to prevent monks lacking spiritual maturity from being ensnared by the beauty of a woman's flesh. Sufficiently stoic while facing the young woman's body, he was confident enough to disregard the rule. He carried the body but did not let his heart be touched by this powerful manifestation of the beauty of the earth. The disciple, on the other hand, did not enter into contact with the woman, but he let his heart be captured by her flesh, and thereby found himself still disturbed long after she was gone.

Not taking anything to heart, the master follows the way, undisturbed and confident. He danced with a thing of the earth, the flesh of a woman, but did not take hold of her. He carried her briefly and let her go, in a smooth, harmonious movement. The pertinence of this example is easy to perceive, because the temptations of the flesh are as strong as they are universally shared, and therefore easily seen. The things of the earth, in general, are nonetheless no different than the body of someone of the opposite sex. They can lure men and women into a trap and possess them, perhaps even more easily, and this for a very simple reason: man is seldom careful as he faces these less obvious temptations, incredulous that these ordinary things may hold power over him. The sage therefore has to learn to treat every thing of the earth as the old monk treated the woman crossing the river. He takes them up and carries them when the need for it arises, but he swiftly lets these things go as soon as the need for them disappears, as if they were hot pieces of metal that would burn the hands of those holding them for too long.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The story has been retold countless times in modern sources. Its origin, however, could not be precisely located.

⁵⁷ The man considered to have “founded” Chan Buddhism, the Indian monk Bodhidharma, warned that one should also be careful of not being too attached

It would nonetheless seem that there is one thing, and only one, that man may take to heart and to which he may let himself be bound without seeing his freedom disappear in the process: the whole of nature itself, which is carried along the way. The whole of the earth is indeed different from its parts, from the individual things that surround man. The man hoarding gold and jade in his hall is often a slave to his things, because these things are only temporarily in his possession. He may lose them, or they may be stolen, making him live a life filled with worry. The man chasing after riches, flesh, or delicacies that evade him is condemned to never be satisfied, as there will always be more, something that cannot be obtained. Two spouses deeply enamored with one another are bound to grieve sooner or later, as one of them will be taken by death before the other. Attachment to the things of the earth is a source of frustration, because man has no control over the earth, life, or the sky. He and his things are only carried by the flow of nature, following the way, but the whole of the earth differs from other things: it may be continuously fluctuating as it is carried along the way, but it remains, whole, permanent, and secure. Man will inevitably be alienated from his possessions, his things, but it is impossible for him to ever be alienated from the earth itself. The earth, as the whole of matter, may be burnt, molten, struck with an unimaginable force and change of appearance in the process, but it nonetheless still exists as earth. The whole is immutable. It always remains earth, and it therefore is the only earthly thing that man may take to heart without being led to frustration and despair.

Furthermore, another unique peculiarity of the whole compared to the parts concerns the relation between man's ego and the things of the earth. Attachment to particular things of the earth indeed only increases the contrast between man and the whole, making him believe that he stands out from the rest of the creation as his ego is inflated by the power and prestige that he associates with the things that he possesses. Attachment to the whole, on the other hand, has different consequences: avoiding

to the concept of 無心 [wú xīn] itself, or otherwise, it may cause the follower to fall in the very same trap that this concept was supposed to help him avoid. The sage is always in-between, taking nothing to heart and not leaving anything out of it, his mind never strictly adhering to a rule, always taking the middle-way (“菩薩與佛未曾生心，未曾滅心，名為非有非無心；非有非無心，此名為中道。” From: 菩提達磨. 《達摩論》. 普濟堂, 2001. P. 35)

letting himself be chained by particular things and only accepting the yoke of the whole of nature itself, his ego thereby finds itself deflated, shrunk. To bind himself to the whole is to embrace an always increasingly larger and looser set of chains, that grows so big that they become futile. If the walls of the prison are pushed farther away than what man can ever reach, the prison vanishes as it grows larger, and the same goes for the man who embraces the whole as if it were *his* while cutting himself off from the parts. Binding himself to the whole, he does not lose his freedom. On the contrary, he increases it, as one with it, his ego is dissolved, and the last but tightest chain then slips away: the one tying him to his own self. Having released the things of the earth, he finally discovers unity with the earth itself, leaving behind the things to embrace *the* thing, the first and the last: the one.

When the desire to stand out from the rest of the earth has been tamed, the self crumbles and man lets himself fall from the exalted place where he was taken by both his pride and his insecurity. He is a block of ice that encountered the rising sun and slowly melted down, spread onto and into the ground, attracted to the lowest point by the pull of the earth itself. Far from being a punishment, this nonetheless constitutes the reward of the sage. The Chinese monk Dongshan Liangjie (洞山良价) tells us more concerning what the position of the follower of the way should be:

潜行密用, 如愚如鲁。
 “Keeping himself low,
 Unknown and humble,
 Like a fool,
 Like a simpleton.”⁵⁸

Exalted positions are for those who are strong-willed, men of “action,” those who possess riches and power. They are for those who are hard as ice, taking the things of the earth to heart, seeking glory and fame. The world values such positions and such behaviors, and it rewards them by making those who occupy such positions always want for more.

⁵⁸ Original Chinese text from: 祖暕. 《禅林金句》. 巴蜀书社, 1995. P. 206. TBA. (寶鏡三昧).

如
男
如
魯

The sage of the world, however, is the fool of the way, and the sage of the way the fool of the world. The men of power, wealth, and fame despise what is low, what is inconspicuous and simple. The sage nonetheless prefers the way to the world, which too often goes against it. Accepting water as a teacher, he occupies the lowest points, the ones that are closest to the earth. He remains hidden, lying down in the shadows, silent and calm. He does not attract the attention of others and takes pleasure in remaining unnoticed by the world.

The sage prefers the shadows, but he nonetheless does not fear the light of the world. He remains impassive as he faces the hustle and bustle of those seeking to elevate themselves above their brethren, but he does not flee when he finds himself observed and judged by the men of the world. They laugh at him, at his poverty, at his shabby clothes, or his unkempt hair. They call him a fool for refusing to raise himself above the masses, for his disdain for the things of the earth that he has no need of. Unable to conceive that what has value in their eyes may be worthless in his', they are bewildered and perplexed by his way of life, seeing no other explanation than madness to his peculiar behavior.

For the world, the sage is worth no more than a dog or a pig. He does not own parts of the earth, does not value fine garments or spacious houses, and only seems to busy himself with the most basic things of life: quenching his thirst, satisfying his hunger, warming his flesh to calm its shivering... nothing that a dog does not do just as well as he does. Such a comparison would be on point, as like most beasts, and contrary to most men of the world, the sage knows what is enough. He is not guided by an unlimited greed, but rather only by the needs of his flesh. There is nonetheless a crucial difference between the sage and the beasts: he not only has a choice to act differently, but also is strongly enclined by his human nature to join the men of the world, those who are possessed by their own ego. He is a bridge between man and animal, world and earth, bringing both realms closer together by inviting, through his example, others to let go of the things of the earth and to begin to play with them, abandoning the possession of the parts to embrace the entirety, thereby living in accordance with the way.

Furthermore, to be despised by the world and to occupy the

lowest point of the earth may also be a blessing in disguise. What is at the top can only be brought down, and what does not bend is condemned to break as it encounters a stronger force. Fame attracts jealousy. Wealth invites violence and theft. There are therefore many benefits to staying in the shadows, many gifts given to the man who does not stand out from the crowd and who is content with occupying the places that no one seeks. The following story, attributed to Zhuangzi, well illustrates this point:

Shi the Carpenter was on his way to the state of Qi. When he got to Quyuan, he saw an oak tree that served as the village shrine. This tree was so huge that it could shelter thousands of oxen. A hundred spans in girth, it towered above the surrounding hills with its lowest branches eighty feet from the ground. A dozen of its branches were big enough to be made into boats. Sightseers were like crowds in a marketplace, but the carpenter did not care to look at it and went on without a pause.

His apprentice, however, gazed his fill and, when he caught up with his master, said, "Since I took up my ax to learn the trade from you, master, I've never seen any timber as marvelous as this. But you do not care to have a look at it, and walk on without stopping for a moment. Why?"

Shi the Carpenter said, "Forget it! Don't talk about it! It's a useless tree. A boat made from it would sink; a coffin made from it would rot; a vessel made from it would split; a door made from it would sweat; and a beam made from it would be infested. The timber is worthless and useless. That's why it can stand so many years."

After Shi the Carpenter arrived at home, the shrine oak appeared in his dream, saying, "What other trees are you comparing me with? Are you comparing me with useful trees? Hawthorns, pear trees, orange trees and pomelo trees are all fruit trees. The fruits will be torn off as soon as they are ripe. And then the trees will be abused—their large branches will be broken and their small branches will be snapped. It is their utility that makes their life miserable. That is why they can-

not live out their life-span but die a premature death. These trees have brought worldly assaults upon themselves. It is the same with all things. For a long time I have been trying to be useless. On several occasions I had a narrow escape.

Now that I am useless, my uselessness is of the greatest use to me. If I had been useful, how could I have benefitted from this great use? Besides, you and I are both things. How can you judge me as such? As a useless man about to die, how can you understand a useless tree?"

When Shi the Carpenter woke up and told his apprentice about his dream, the apprentice said, "If it aims at uselessness, why should it have served as a shrine?"

Shi the Carpenter said, "Stop! None of your nonsense! It is the shrine that takes the form of a tree. The tree has suffered insults and blames from those who do not understand it. If it had not been a shrine, this tree would have been cut down. Moreover, it protects itself in a way different from other trees. If you judge it according to convention, you would be wide of the mark!"⁵⁹

As pointed out by the tree in the dream, man is also a thing, just as the tree itself. He is continuously judged by the world and evaluated according to a multitude of criteria. Is he rich or poor? Powerful or powerless? Beautiful or ugly? Strong or weak? The

⁵⁹ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 64. English translation based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, pp. 65–67, but modified to better fit the present work; Original Chinese text: "匠石之齊，至乎曲轅，見櫟社樹。其大蔽數千牛，絜之百圍，其高臨山十仞而後有枝，其可以為舟者旁十數。觀者如市，匠伯不顧，遂行不輟。弟子厭觀之，走及匠石，曰：「自吾執斧斤以隨夫子，未嘗見材如此其美也。先生不肯視，行不輟，何邪？」曰：「已矣，勿言之矣！散木也，以為舟則沈，以為棺槨則速腐，以為器則速毀，以為門戶則液樸，以為柱則蠹。是不材之木也，無所可用，故能若是之壽。」匠石歸，櫟社見夢曰：「女將惡乎比予哉？若將比予於文木邪？夫柎、梨、橘、柚、果、蓏之屬，實熟則剝，剝則辱，大枝折，小枝泄。此以其能苦其生者也，故不終其天年而中道夭，自培擊於世俗者也。物莫不若是。且予求無所可用久矣，幾死，乃今得之，為予大用。使予也而有用，且得有此大也邪？且也，若與予也皆物也，奈何哉其相物也？而幾死之散人，又惡知散木！」匠石覺而診其夢。弟子曰：「趣取無用，則為社何邪？」曰：「密！若無言！彼亦直寄焉，以為不知己者詬厲也。不為社者，且幾有翦乎！且也，彼其所保，與眾異，以義譽之，不亦遠乎！」"

answers to these questions give him his place in society, a rank that will be acknowledged by most of the inhabitants of this world. A high rank implies social elevation, reserved for the most efficient players of the games of the world: the pursuit of things of the earth and the inflation of the ego. As shown earlier, the elevated places are nonetheless the most dangerous ones, and this is true both on the earth and in the world. The men tirelessly competing against one another to win the games of the world see the elite as things to be used, things that will help them to reach higher ground, until they are on the top of the world. Their ascension requires that those who are higher either help them to climb or be brought down, toppled and thrown into the depths. Men are mere commodities, tools or resources to be exploited for profit. The affluent is targeted for his wealth. The beautiful becomes as an accessory for prestige. The strong is used as a beast to produce new things, transforming elements of the earth into valuables. The men possessing the qualities desired by the world can be hunted down and enslaved by men of power. They are building blocks upon which those in power stand to reach always higher ground, the loftiest parts of the world, whose height knows no limit.

Because the men valued by the world are bound to be used and abused by it, the follower of the way takes cover in the lowest parts of this world, in the same manner that water occupies the lowest parts of the earth. His human nature forces him to remain a dweller of the world, to use its language, its concepts, but he makes his presence in it as stealthy as possible. He does not strive against it. He does not attempt to destroy its structures, but simply remains where he is least noticeable. The world values wealth? He possesses no thing, and therefore he is safe from thieves and useless to men of greed. The world admires beauty? He does not take care of his appearance, wears no perfume or fine clothes, and he is therefore despised by the aesthete and the lustful. The world regards physical strength highly? He does not develop his strength beyond what he needs to live a modest life, and he is therefore ignored by those seeking protection or those who need to overpower their enemies.

The follower of the way does not want to be useful, to be possessed, to become a means through which the man of greed can elevate himself in the world. He has released the things of the earth, including the bodies of every other man and woman. He

does not use others and does not want to be used by others. He is now a player, someone who plays with the things of the earth rather than uses them, and he therefore prefers the company of other players to the one of those competing for worldly ascension. He is also blessed by the fact that only players just like him would want to meet a man like him, someone who occupies the parts of the world where most men do not want to find themselves. His lowly position in the world nonetheless does not mean that he cannot nurture and develop any worldly quality. Just as the tree of Zhuangzi's story found a use that not only does not lead it to a premature death but rather protects it, in its function as a shrine, the follower of the way may also find a place in the world that would neither earn him danger nor scorn. Wisdom may, for example, be seen as a worldly quality that would seldom attract the attention of the men competing for wealth and fame. A monk who cultivates his wisdom while trying to stay in the shadows of the world may contribute to the improvement of the world without being condemned to be used or to die prematurely. The man of the way may therefore be given an opportunity to find a balance between the benefit of uselessness and the possibility to teach the way to the world. He can show the world how to play with the things of the earth, show the usefulness of uselessness, and liberate things from the hands of the men of greed.

Mostly useless to the world, the sage is released by it, just like men discard other useless things of earth. As he himself is a thing of the earth, he can therefore also be played with by other players, men who have let go of all the things that they possessed or desired. A brotherhood of the useless may naturally form in the nethermost parts of the world, the gutter where the waters flow down from above to be gathered out of the sight of lofty men. Playing together, as a mischief of rats running in a basement in the darkest hours of the night, they are content with their fate, enjoying the freedom of the one who has none, far closer to the stars of the sky and the way that guides them than those living in their luxurious perch, palaces of marble, where the finest foods are eaten and the most delicate beauties are exposed.

The author of the story of the tree offers us another comparison between the follower of the way and animals:

夫聖人鶉居而鷇食，鳥行而無彰。

“The sage finds his dwelling
like the quail (without any choice of its own),
and is fed like the fledgling;
He is like the bird which
passes on (through the air),
and leaves no trace (of its flight).”

The first part of this sentence repeats what has already been told in the previous pages, describing how the sage lets himself be carried by the flow of nature. The last part, on the other hand, tells us something that can be pondered further: the fact that the sage would not leave any trace of his passage. The birds are creatures of the sky, and it is in the air that they leave no trace, but man is a creature of the earth. Contrary to the air, which does not let itself be marked by the wings of a bird or the hand of man, the earth is like a large canvas covered in fresh paint, a surface that both records the imprint of the things entering in contact with it and itself leaves its mark on the things that it touches: the paint, the mud and water covering the planet. Even the birds of the air leave traces upon the surface of the earth, their seal, on each place where they set foot, traces that will nonetheless swiftly be erased by the rain and the winds, the forces of the sky. Man can nonetheless do more than leave evanescent footprints in the soil: he can carve the earth on a large scale, transforming both its surface and its depths, to shape it according to his will and the use he has of it.

The traces not left by the sage are not his footprints, which are very natural, but rather the marks of his will, of his hands. As the ultimate thing of the earth, the earth as a whole can receive the same treatment as any other thing. Man may not be able to seize its entirety, to grasp it in his hands or to lock it up in a fortified chamber, but he may attempt to possess it. He may desire to control it and to make it obey the wishes of his own ego. Like an animal marking its territory with its scent, man can leave furrows in the earth to show his power, both to the earth

⁵⁹ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 180. Translation from: *The Sacred Books of China*. Atlantic Publishers, 1879. P. 314.

itself and to the men with whom he competes in the race for the top of the world. The traces of inflated egos of the most powerful men in history are still visible to this day. The pyramids of Egypt still stand, and stand out of the surface of the earth thousands of years after they were made as graves for pharaohs sitting on the most exalted place of their world. These monuments to man's ego break the natural harmony of the landscape in which they are built. They may please man's eyes and fill him with awe of the power of other men, but they also are monuments to man's immaturity, a reminder of his failure to appreciate the beauty of nature, undisturbed by the hand of man.

To shape the earth is a form of violence against it. The follower of the way prefers to play with it, as a whole, just like he plays with each thing of the earth, as he does not distinguish the parts from the whole and only sees the earth as one gigantic thing. To play with it implies that contacts will be transient, delicate. If they are prolonged and violent, it will be by necessity and not merely the result of a whim. Knowing that the mountains will be his grave and that the rivers will carve his tombstone, he does not need nor wants to disfigure the face of the earth with his scribbles. He admires its natural, raw beauty, hand-painted through the ages by the way itself, and would not dare to touch and spoil it. He only wants to be close to it, to let it permeate the core of his own being, so that he may become oblivious to the smallness of his own self and feel one with the whole. The line between him and the earth is then blurred. The players are dancing as one body, letting themselves be guided together by the way, carried through time and space, throughout the sky, forgetting themselves in one another.

Like a sparrow, leaving only footprints that are swiftly erased, the follower of the way has no ambition. He does not join the race for the top of the world, and he leaves the earth in peace, only taking from it what he truly needs. The manner in which he spends his days may not significantly differ from the one of those who have yet to see and follow the way, but his state of mind is nonetheless radically different. While the competitors, those running the race, set their eyes and their heart on the loftiest places of the world, on the more exquisite foods, on gold and diamonds or on luxurious garments and mansions, the man of the way puts his heart in the most basic actions of life. One of the greatest masters of the

Chinese Chan tradition, Linji Yixuan⁶⁰ (臨濟義玄), thus mentions these things that occupy a prominent place in the life of a disciple:

佛法無用功處，
 隻是平常無事，
 著衣吃飯，
 屙屎送尿，
 困來即臥。
 愚人笑我，
 智乃知焉。
 “To follow the law of the awakened (Buddha)
 Does not demand great effort,
 It is ordinary and simple:
 Wearing clothes, eating a meal;
 Urinate and defecate.
 If you are sleepy, just go to sleep.
 The fool will mock me,
 But the wise will know what I mean.”⁶¹

These five actions certainly are among the most essential and the most universal human activities, performed daily by every single man, woman, and child, since the dawn of humanity. They are so ordinary that few men ponder their nature or even pay attention to their importance. Two of them are often considered to be shameful to speak of, and they are performed out of the sight of even the people with whom one is the most intimate, spouses or lovers. The first one is also deeply linked with shame and intimacy: clothes indeed not only represent a way to preserve the warmth of the body and prevent it from being snatched away by the winds, but also a way to cover the parts of the body that are associated with the other two, as well as with copulation. They were therefore often considered taboo, rarely talked about.

From man's rising up, when he wears his clothes for the day, until the time when he goes to sleep, the aforementioned quote

⁶⁰ Master Linji is more commonly known in English as Rinzai, the Japanese pronunciation of his name.

⁶¹ Original Chinese text from: 聖嚴。《禪的生活》。東初出版社，1993。N.p. (Secondary quote from the 指月錄). TBA.

represents a schedule of his daily needs, the activities that are necessarily part of his day. The center part of this day is the replenishing of his forces through the digestion of food, the ingestion of other living things, plants or animals, which gives him the energy to live another day above the earth. These activities are so common and so basic that man does not attach much importance to them. The Chan tradition, following the way, nonetheless exalts them, seeing them as the most important actions that one performs daily, parts of life that should not only be ignored or hidden but rather be seen as essential to man's being and performed with a mindfulness of their primordial role in life.

Standing in sharp contrast with the luxurious things of the earth valued by those running the race of the world, the basic needs of man appear lowly, but they are deeply anchored in his existence, and he should appreciate that. He should focus his attention on their nature as he performs his daily activities, not letting them be a mere routine, but rather a liturgy celebrating his own being, as well as the whole of the earth and the sky. Eating his meal or excreting what he has no need of, he should not do anything else that might distract him from this, not even think about other things. The fulfillment of each one of his daily needs is an opportunity to experience the blessing of life itself, the depth of being, as it is directly through these activities that his being can be prolonged. From the point of view of a follower of the way, the most basic activities are therefore also the highest ones, the ones offering the best chance for man to play with the things of the earth that he needs the most, and with which he is the most physically intimate, the things covering his own body or the things passing through the entirety of his flesh, even forming his own body itself, as the food that he ingests is transformed into the cells allowing him to stand upon the earth and to experience it through his senses.

The embracer of the way therefore pursues the deepening of his mindfulness of the nature of the things of the earth and of the earth as a whole, rather than things themselves: flesh, gold, or luxuries. His riches are his closeness with the things of the earth, with which he plays, without grasping them. To him, these things are not objects that are possessed and accumulated for the inflation of his ego or purely sensory pleasures. Each one of them rather represents an opportunity to strengthen his bond with the

whole of the earth, without tying him to the thing itself. They offer him an experience of the earth, a close contact with it, and it is through these experiences that he may dis-cover the truth of his own being, the essence of his own life.

The way is not a method. It cannot be followed without constant attention, as there is no single roadmap for the one walking on the path. To believe that one knows the way is proof that one has already gone astray. One does not need to be a monk nor does one need to spend his days practicing sitting meditation in order to follow it. The way guides the flow of nature as a whole, including man himself, and it can therefore be best seen in the most ordinary, the most natural things and activities, those that are the most deeply rooted in the experience of the earth. As told by the Chinese monk Yongjia Xuanjue:

行亦禪，坐亦禪，
語默動靜體安然。

“Walking can be Chan, sitting can be Chan,
Speaking or silent, active or quiet,
the essence can be at peace.”⁶²

To practice Chan is simply to embrace one's own nature, to follow the way that guides the whole of the earth and the sky. This does not mean that the practice that is the most commonly associated with Chan, sitting meditation, does not have any benefit, but only that it is not a requirement, and certainly not the heart of the following of the way. There is no narrow door through which the way can be seen and followed. It is wide open, as wide as the universe itself. One only needs to pay attention to it. It lets itself be seen, easily, to all those who let go of the things that block their view. One only needs an ordinary mind (平常心⁶³), one that embraces the most basic human activities as deeply spiritual matters, gifts from nature, experiences that are a source of contentment and peace, doorways to enlightenment.

Releasing the things of the earth, man can dis-cover the earth

⁶² Original Chinese text from: 玄覺 蔣九愚. 《新譯永嘉大師證道歌》. 三民書局股份有限公司, 2005. P. 4. TBA.

⁶³ 【píng cháng xīn】.

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itself. Abandoning the race for wealth, lust, and power, he can finally begin to see the beauty and truth of what he has done each day of his life: eating, drinking, walking, sleeping, dreaming, breathing. His mind is now unencumbered, free of the burden of the race, liberated from the yoke of the things of the earth surrounding him. Endowed with the knowledge of the freedom brought on by the release of the things, he can point out the way to those who are looking for it. The following story, depicting a dialog initiated by the Chan master Zhaozhou Congshen (趙州從諗), well illustrates how can the way be shown, without teaching, without preaching, letting the disciple dis-cover the way by himself, the master only gently stimulating his mind and his senses:

有僧到趙州從諗禪師處，
 師問：「新近曾到此間麼？」
 曰：「曾到」。
 師曰：「喫茶去」。
 又問僧，僧曰：「不曾到」。
 師曰：「喫茶去」，
 後院主問曰：「為什麼曾到也云喫茶去，
 不曾到也云喫茶去？」
 師召院主，主應諾，師曰：「喫茶去！」
 One day, a newcomer arrived to
 the monastery of master Zhaozhou Congshen.
 The master asked him:
 “Have you been to this monastery before?”
 The newcomer answered: “No, I haven’t.”
 The master said: “Let’s have some tea.”
 The master asked another monk
 the same question.
 And the monk answered: “Yes, I have come here before.”
 The master once again said: “Let’s have some tea.”
 The abbot of the monastery then asked:
 “Why do you tell everybody
 “Let’s have some tea” whether or not
 they have come here before?”
 The master told the abbot to come closer,
 and the abbot approached.
 The master then told him: “Let’s have some tea.”⁶⁴

People in search of spiritual fulfillment, such as philosophers and monks, often lose themselves in the loftiness of intellectual pursuits, seeking knowledge in a manner that has much in common with the way by which men possessed by the things of the earth seek gold or luxurious vestments. They want answers to all their questions, losing sight of the way and losing touch with the ground, the earth that is both under their feet and what their flesh is made of. Spending their days thinking, reading, and talking, they do not pay attention to what constitutes the most essential things in his life, what allows them to *be*: the food coming out of the ground that goes throughout their body and is scattered in their flesh to renew and strengthen it; The clothes made of skin or plant fibers, with which they cover themselves, preventing their warmth from being stolen by the frigid breeze of the winter or protecting their skin from the onslaught of the sun's rays during the summer.

The master knows the heart of the younger, more inexperienced disciples. He plays with them, their own game, by asking them a question. He does not care about the answer, because the question is only asked in order for it to shine as an example of futile interrogation, thereby meant to lead the disciple toward the way, away from the loftiest parts of the world and back to the earth. The answer is the same, because the question is meaningless: what they should do, rather than talk, is simply to experience something, experience a thing of the earth that is part of what is essential to man's life: drinking. The master does not propose water, the liquid necessary to life, but rather tea, the ordinary drink offered to a guest in China at the time. More than the drinking of water, the drinking of tea can become the trigger of a rich sensory experience. Hot water is poured into a cup, where the dried and shriveled tea leaves are suddenly soaked and open up, letting their essence be dissolved into the boiling liquid, dying it with various shades of green, red, or yellow, swirling like a swarm of birds. The cup warms man's hands as he lifts it up, and its heat is carried by his bloodstream all around his body, as he takes it to his lips and lets the tea flow down his throat and enter his belly. This experience, an intimate contact with things of the earth, can bring man closer to the way that a hundred discourses or a thousand books. He only needs someone to point out the fact that it is in

⁶⁴ Original Chinese text from: 蘇淵雷 普濟. 《五燈會元》. 中華書局, 1984. P. 52. TBA.

those experiences of the earth that the way is the most easily seen and followed. The things of the earth are a double-edged sword, something that can lead him to the pit of self-destruction or to fulfillment and unity with the earth and the sky. Man, however, is not only a creature of the earth: he is also a dweller and builder of a world that stands on top of the earth.

Chapter 2

The Things of the World

2.1 The World

Man lives his life between earth and sky. His flesh comes out of the former and he is born into the latter. His body is made of earth, of matter, but he spends his days roaming through the air of the sky, from which he cannot be separated more than a few minutes without his breath of life fading away. The earth supports him, and the sky offers him a space in which he can accomplish his destiny, a space that includes time as an extra dimension. What he accomplishes; what he builds with his mind and with his hands, can nonetheless be distinguished from both earth and sky. What stands in contrast to nature is what bears the mark of man's hands and mind, as he has been endowed with the will to create, not only guided by his instinct for survival but also by his own ego or by his desire for a communion with the whole of nature from which he is alienated, precisely because of his uniqueness. This part of the creation that stands both on top and out of nature is man's *world*.

The world forms a third realm, a realm of "things" caught between earth and sky that is both possessed by man and that possesses him. In modern Chinese, it is usually called 世界¹. The first ideogram composing this word represents leaves on the branch of a tree:



This is a symbol of life and of its continuous change, well represented by the leaves, whose emergence, growth, and death can be witnessed all over the earth every year. The relationship between the second ideogram and man's world appears to be more explicit. It indeed depicts a man (on the right side) standing by a field (left side), whose boundaries are clearly apparent:

¹ 【shì jiè】. In Classical Chinese, both ideograms can be used independently and express the concept of "world."



The square field symbolizes the realm of man, the space where he toils day after day to extract his sustenance from the earth. It also represents the boundaries within which he can evolve, the space allotted to him.

The world is a construction, an edifice that is collectively built by men, but it is also something that both shelters and limits them, as while man can try to enlarge this world by adding things to it, he cannot freely roam outside of its boundaries. The world is a space that offers him freedom within its boundaries, but it also represents a limit that is hard for him to cross. Both a home and a prison, the world is *his*, and he belongs to it.

Another vision of man's world may nonetheless be found in ancient Chinese philosophical texts. In Old Chinese, the "creation" is indeed often designated with a peculiar expression: 天地萬物,² literally meaning: "The sky, the earth, and the ten thousand things." The ten thousand, or the myriad of things (萬物³) can correspond to what we call the "world." This myriad of things is what stands on top of the earth, which itself is encompassed by the sky. The very order of the Chinese expression reflects the structural relationship between the three realms: first comes the sky, as the space and time that offers a place where other things can emerge, and then comes the earth, the matter that fills this space. Out of the earth, life and man can sprout, and it is man who begins to break the unity, the wholeness of the creation to create a myriad of things: the world.

The world therefore represents an aggregate of "things," and in order to accurately perceive the nature of the world, one must first begin to examine the nature of "things" themselves. Only then can the nature of the world be uncovered.

² 【tiān dì wàn wù】.

³ 【wàn wù】.

2.1.1 The Nature of Things

Things are the basic elements of man's world. As was seen in the previous chapter, he is at all times surrounded by things of the earth, material objects with which he interacts and that are part of his life. The concept of "thing" may appear extremely familiar and easy to grasp, but its nature is nonetheless rarely examined. The things around us may belong to the earth, but the concept of "thing" is itself immaterial, estranged from the earth. A rock may be a piece of the whole of the earth, but it only exists as a thing distinct from the whole in man's mind, in his world. Nature does not by itself distinguish a rock from the soil that surrounds it. It does not separate the tree from its leaves. It is man who needs to separate in order to be able to grasp the creation.

In Old Chinese, the ideogram representing the concept of "thing" depicts a cow on the left side, and a knife dripping with blood on the right side:



The original meaning of this depiction appears to have been based on the fact that the slaughtering of the animal symbolized the relationship between the butcher and the cow: one of possession, of subjugation, where the former treats the latter as an object, a thing that can be used according to one's wishes, including putting it to death, dismembering it, and ultimately eating it. This picture well illustrates a particular aspect of man's relationship with things: the fact that man wants to control them, to use them, either to merely survive or to fulfill the desires of his ego.

The picture painted by the ideogram may nonetheless also be read differently. The cow may be seen as a symbol of the whole of nature, and the bloody knife as representing man's mind, which cuts the creation into a series of pieces, relatively arbitrarily chosen. There is indeed no objective separation between all the things that we can see around us, even though our senses and our mind

may lead us to think otherwise. A rock lying on the soil of a plain stands out and man's eye easily perceives it as something distinct from the rest. The fact that he can pick it up with one swoop of his hand also contributes to the fact that he perceives it as something separate from the rest of the earth. This nonetheless does not imply that such a division is natural, or objective. Different people and different cultures may choose a different pattern for the cutting out of the whole of nature into things, guided by different motives. Some will see the creation through the lens of their greed, while others will let themselves be guided by the way itself. A famous story attributed to Zhuangzi illustrates such a behavior:

A butcher was carving a bullock for Lord Wenhui. At every touch of his hand, every move of his shoulder, every stamp of his foot and every nudge of his knee, there came the sound of slicing the flesh and wielding the knife – a perfect rhythm to the Dance of Mulberry Trees and a perfect tune of the music in King Yao's time.

Lord Wenhui remarked, "Oh, splendid! That you have such a masterful skill!"

The butcher put down his knife and responded, "What I love is the way, which is much more splendid than my skill. When I first began to carve a bullock, I saw nothing but the whole bullock. Three years later, I no longer saw the bullock as a whole but in parts. Now I work on it by intuition and do not look at it with my eyes. My visual organs stop functioning while my intuition goes its own way. In accordance with the natural grain, I cleave along the main seams and thrust the knife into the big cavities. Following the natural structure of the bullock, I never touch veins or tendons, much less the big bones! A good butcher changes his knife once a year because he cuts the flesh; an ordinary butcher changes his knife once a month because he hacks the bones. Using this knife for nineteen years, I have carved thousands of bullocks, but the edge of my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come from the whetstone."⁴

⁴ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 42. English translation

Man nevertheless seldom himself proceeds to the cutting out of the whole into things. He is taught from infancy to recognize and identify things according to predetermined patterns linked to a precise culture, but this does not mean that he cannot create things, and that he cannot become a builder of the world.

The first things that man becomes familiar with are things of the earth, material objects, but while man's world stands upon the earth, it is not bounded by it. The world is the realm of all things, and not only the things of the earth. There are things of the world, just as there are things of the earth. All things are part of the world, but not all things are made of earth or are encompassed by the sky. The world as such is a construction that exists in man's mind, both as an individual and collectively through mankind as a whole, even though it can be manifested on the earth, as man-made cities standing out of the flow of nature, for example. Because of this, the world is the realm where man is king, where he can not only manipulate and build: he can create out of nothingness. He can create "things" of the world that are detached from the earth and the sky, "ideas" that can become parts of the world. It includes the whole of the earth and the sky, cut out as a series of things, but also the metaphysical, that is, what transcends the earth and the sky, what stands out of them both, even though the world as a whole still needs them to endure: the world, including its metaphysical component, would crumble if it were not supported by man's brain, which is flesh and blood, part of the earth which itself is encompassed by the sky.

Man can therefore create things and build his world, using it to reach personal goals, whatever they may be. He may use both the things of the earth and those of the world to puff up his ego by climbing the social ladders that are found in this world, but he may also use them to get a clearer view of the way and better follow

based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 43 (Ch. 3), but modified to better fit the present work. Original Chinese text: "庖丁為文惠君解牛，手之所觸，肩之所倚，足之所履，膝之所踦，砉然騞然，奏刀騞然，莫不中音。合於《桑林》之舞，乃中《經首》之會。文惠君曰：「謔！善哉！技蓋至此乎？」庖丁釋刀對曰：「臣之所好者道也，進乎技矣。始臣之解牛之時，所見無非牛者。三年之後，未嘗見全牛也。方今之時，臣以神遇，而不以目視，官知止而神欲行。依乎天理，批大郤，導大窾，因其固然。技經肯綮之未嘗，而況大軋乎！良庖歲更刀，割也；族庖月更刀，折也。今臣之刀十九年矣，所解數千牛矣，而刀刃若新發於硎。彼節者有間，而刀刃者無厚，以無厚入有間，恢恢乎其於游刃必有餘地矣，是以十九年而刀刃若新發於硎。」"

it. The world offers him a great degree of freedom to create and manipulate things, greater than the one he enjoys with the things of the earth, with which he is constantly limited in his actions by the rigid nature of the earth itself, the physical laws governing the material realm.

All “things,” no matter whether they partly belong to the earth or are purely worldly, are somewhat fleeting and undefined. They can evolve, transformed by the flow of time or under the influence of the will of the men harboring these “things” in their minds. They do not even have to exist, as the unicorns of our fairy tales, or as the very concept of “nothingness.” The boundaries between things are also very impermanent and evanescent, and things will almost always be like Russian dolls: they can be seen as sets of smaller things, which themselves can be decomposed in smaller parts, without rigid, objective separations between them. A rock is itself composed of different things: various minerals, which themselves may be composed of different molecules, themselves formed with different atomic elements, etc. All these “things” only exist as things within man’s world, even though they are part of the whole of the earth, as tangible material elements.

Most men see the things of the earth and the world, but few think of them as “things.” They see what the thing represents, but fail to perceive the role played by the representation itself. They fail to differentiate the sign from what the sign designates. They see the earth and the sky through the lens of their world, but they are unable to see the lens itself, as its transparency and inconspicuousness make it hard to notice. The easiest way to begin to perceive the role played by “things,” as the basic elements of man’s world, may be to look at the most explicit, the most visible signs designating things of the earth and of the world: words.

The link between the concept of “thing,” as an element of the world, and words, basic units of meaning in language, may perhaps be seen in the third sentence of the *Treatise on the Way and Virtue*, even though its translation is subject to a wide range of interpretation:

無名天地之始。
 有名萬物之母。
 “Without names was the beginning
 of the sky and the earth.
 As names came to be,
 the myriad of things was born.”⁵

What this reading of Laozi’s sentence gives us is an insight into the nature of things. If names are at the source of the world, the *myriad of things*, it is because a thing is tied to a name, or several names. As it has already been seen, a “thing” is an element of the world, a piece that has been separated from the whole, cut out by man’s mind so that it can be grasped by it. Man is nonetheless not a solitary creature: the world that he builds is not only inhabited by him alone. He shares this world with other human beings, not only sharing its earthly component, the things of the earth that surround them, but also things that entirely belong to the world, things that transcend the earth and the sky. This sharing of metaphysical, worldly “thing,” can occur because of a biological characteristic that is, for now at least, unique to man: his capacity to communicate using an articulated language. Language is man’s treasure, something that opens up a space where he can build a unique world together with other human beings.

Language is a way to manipulate signs, based on both natural constraints, such as the anatomy of man’s mouth and ears, and

⁵ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系 〈7〉 老子 莊子上卷》, p. 11. TBA (Ch. 1); The Chinese text of this sentence is subject to interpretation, especially due to the fact that Classical Chinese has no punctuation. As it is often the case with ancient Chinese texts, different translations provide widely diverging interpretations, so different that one may not even notice that these are translations of the very same text. The translation given above should therefore only be seen as a personal interpretation rather than an objective rendition of Laozi’s text. As an example of the highly subjective nature of the translations of Laozi’s treatise, here are three different translations of the aforementioned sentence:

Legge’s translation: “(Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.” Suzuki’s translation: “The Unnamable is of heaven and earth the beginning. The Namable becomes of the ten thousand things the mother.” Goddard’s translation: “And yet this ineffable Dao was the source of all spirit and matter, and being expressed was the mother of all created things.”

無名天地之始

有名萬物之母

conventions determined by men themselves and passed on from generation to generation, from land to land. It allows man to refer to things, and thereby to share a common pattern cutting out of nature into "things" by assigning names to each one of them. Each "thing" of the world is tied to a name, which allows man to grasp a mental representation of this thing. This name, this sign of things, can be stored by being written on a piece of paper. Man can throw this sign into someone else's ears by uttering it with his mouth. It can pass through time and space, staying hidden and being carried by the flow of nature, until someone, someday, will un-earth it and bring it back into his world.

Language therefore induces a continuous bilateral flux between earth and world. A thing of the earth is represented in the world by a sign, which in turn can become incarnated in a part of the earth: If someone writes the word "rock" on a sheet of paper, the sign designating the rock becomes part of the earth, a black ink picture on a white surface, which can remain on the earth even when no man is left to read it. A sound wave coming out of someone's mouth as he utters the same word represents a similar earthly imprint of a worldly sign, as this wave echoes through the air, causing little particles of earthly matter to vibrate. Things of the earth therefore become linked with things of the world, and things of the world may find their way back to the earth. No matter their origin, the earth or the world itself, all things are in their essence part of the world, as things are only "things" within its boundaries. This nonetheless does not necessarily imply an identity between the boundaries of language and the boundaries of the world.

Language occupies a large part of man's world. When man looks around and sees the things that are found within his house or in the streets, he does not merely see a puzzle composed of thousands of unidentified parts forming the creation. What he sees are determinate things, associated with names that he has learned since his first years. He does not see indefinite objects, but rather "cars," "books," or "cups." The name of these things becomes part of them, as parts of his world, parts of the way he experiences the earth and the sky. The world, man's vision of the earth, the sky, and the world itself, is nonetheless larger than the sum of all the signs or combinations of signs of his language. He can indeed experience or imagine things without being able to

represent them with words, and he can bring these experiences into his world without them becoming part of his language. Animals may also be seen as having a world of their own, even without having a proper, articulated language. Their senses and instinct can identify contrasts within nature and identify parts of the whole as standing out from the rest, thereby also cutting it out into a set of parts that can be grasped by their nervous system. A bird can recognize an insect flying through the sky by his moving pattern and identify it as food. This implies that this creature views nature through the lens of a particular world, even though it has no consciousness of the nature of the “things” that it sees.

The world of non-humans is nonetheless hardly comparable to the one of man. The former is like a field where a few bricks have been scattered, while the latter is an imposing building, rising toward the sky and so wide that it reaches the horizon. Language is the driving force allowing the building of the world rather than the world itself. Words are building blocks, and grammar is a mortar binding them together to form larger structures. More than this, language allows man to grasp things with his mind that he cannot grasp with his hands. His arms cannot embrace the whole of the earth, but using a single word, “earth,” which is easily thought of, uttered, or written, it appears to him that he can grasp the entirety of the earth with his mind, making it a “thing” that can be easily manipulated, communicated, or even possessed, all of this within the world itself.

The things of the world therefore empower man. Each thing that is grasped by his mind can become *his*, something that he understands and can use. Without this capacity to split the whole into parts, he would not be able to communicate with other men, using language, things of the world. He would not be able to distinguish the things of the earth that could become food and allow him to live. “Things” are man’s pride, his plowshare and his sword, what allows him to take control of parts of the earth and of his own self, his own being. These things nonetheless form something greater than the sum of their parts.

2.1.2 The Myriad of Things

The world is a space opened up by life itself, which stands between earth and sky. Its origin is mysterious, and it began long before human beings emerged from the earth. Man's ancestors, found on the "animal" branch of the tree of life, were the first to begin to carve out things out of the whole of the earth, but man transformed this space by extending it beyond earth and sky, creating things that were purely worldly, detached from the other realms. This revolution, this explosion of the world, making it transcend earth and sky; matter, space and time, came to be because of language.

Language nonetheless is not man's creation. He may have chosen names and certain grammatical conventions, but he only did this because he had been given the capacity to do so, by nature itself. A chimpanzee cannot speak, because his very flesh does not allow him to articulate and sufficiently control the sound he produces to develop a spoken language. Man's brain, his mouth, and his hands, on the other hand, are very well suited for language, more than those of any other creature. His ability to become a builder of the world is a gift bestowed onto him alone, by nature itself. The way guided life and led to the emergence of the world.

The Chinese philosopher thus describes the emergence of the world:

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

"The way produced one; one produced two;

Two produced three; three produced the myriad of things.

The ten thousand things leave behind them the Obscurity and go forward to embrace the Brightness

as they are harmonized by the blending of their flux."⁶

The whole came to being out of the way itself. Something then stood out of the oneness of the whole; something broke this unity

⁶ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系 7》老子 莊子上卷, pp. 78–79. English translation based on the one found in: Lao Tzu, *The Tao Teh Ching*, np. but modified to better fit the present work (Ch. 42).

and emerged to become an independent “thing.” This second thing may be seen as the first creature that ventured into the world, the first being that distinguished a “thing” from the whole, thereby creating the third thing of the creation. Thus did the myriad of things begin, naturally emerging, led by the way itself, like a clay pot falling down the earth, slowly broken into an increasingly larger number of pieces, in a continuous movement guided by the flow of time, the work of the sky, and the pull of the earth.

The Obscurity (陰【yīn】) is the realm of the shadows, what can be felt but cannot be seen without the sky, its space and its light, and from which the myriad of things emerged, that is, the earth. The Brightness (陽【yáng】), standing in contrast with it, is the realm of light, what can be seen but cannot be grasped with man’s hands, that is, the sky. The myriad of things, heart of the world, rests upon the earth out of which it was born, but as men unceasingly create new things and build up the world to always higher ground, they progressively become more and more distant from the earth and increasingly reach out to the sky, to what is unreachable, lofty, and luminous. This also represents the elevation of the world away from the “down to earth” reality of the experience of the senses and toward the chimerical products of man’s imagination, the purely metaphysical, the shining lights and sparks that lure man away from the cold and plain nature of the earth. The way nonetheless acts as a natural mechanism balancing the two complementary forces. Brightness indeed needs Obscurity to shine, just as Obscurity needs Brightness to *be*. The world needs to rest upon the earth to stand, but the earth needs the world and the sky to be seen, known, and thereby to “exist.”

The myriad of things is built by man, but it is therefore also subject to the influence of the way, which balances the downward pull of the earth and the upward growth of the world, so that both would always serve each other and remain in close contact. Furthermore, if man can be called the builder of the world, his relationship with this world is more complex than the one between a subject and an object. Man indeed represents both an individual and a “kind,” a superorganism formed by the aggregation of countless individuals, each one of which is both a builder of the world and someone dwelling in it. The world outlives any individual, as its weight is shared across all its inhabitants. When one of them dies, the things that he built, if they are deemed valuable,

are preserved and carried by others, becoming part of the edifice that began at the dawn of mankind. It is precisely because of this capacity of man's world to endure, through the transmission allowed by language, that man is able to stand on the shoulders of all his ancestors, benefiting from their knowledge, their wisdom, and their experiences. This, however, implies that the world has a life of its own, independent of the consciousness of any individual.

Mankind has no will of its own, and neither does man's world. Individual men add their contributions to it, as fruits of their will, but the edifice formed by the aggregation of all these contributions is simply caught in larger flows: the one of mankind, as a whole, as well as the one of the earth and the sky. The world continuously changes, and many of these changes are the consequence of the influence of nature itself rather than of the will of any man. The pronunciation of the words uttered in any language evolves through time, without anyone consciously directing these changes, and this is true also of a language's grammar and of its other aspects. The meaning of these words also changes as well, progressively becoming unrecognizable from the one from which they are derived, as their memory fades into oblivion. These changes do not depend on man himself, but rather on the course of the earth and the sky, and the way that they follow. The world is therefore as much shaped by nature as by the mind of man. This has an important consequence: the fact that as a being dwelling in this world, man is not only a builder of the world, he is also carried by the flow of this same world.

The following sentence, attributed to Zhuangzi, may shed some light on the relationship between the earth and the sky on the one hand, and the myriad of things, the world, on the other:

天不產而萬物化，
地不長而萬物育。
“The sky produces nothing,
yet the ten thousand things
experience their transformations;
The earth effects no growth,
yet the ten thousand things
receive their nurture.”⁷

The earth and the sky have no will of their own, and yet, as they carry in their flow the myriad of things, they exert a strong influence upon them. The three realms are directed by the way, and man himself is caught in their flow. Through his will, he can leave traces upon the surface of the earth, and he can add a few building blocks to the city formed by all the things of the world, but the work of the sky will sooner or later erase his imprint on the earth, and what he has built in the world will either collapse or be buried under the weight of new constructions. His will leaves evanescent traces on both earth and world, but the manifestations of his power are in most cases only visible on a very small scale. The whole of the world is constantly harmonized and balanced by the play between the two main forces to which it is subjected: the flow of nature, earth and sky, on the one hand, and the concatenation of the will of all individual men on the other. Will and nature confront each other on the battlefield represented by the world. This confrontation nonetheless always sooner or later ends with an equilibrium between the two forces, as both are ultimately ruled by the way itself, which removes any excess and supplies where there is a lack.

To be conscious of the nature of “things” and of the nature of the world that they form allows man to begin to ponder his own relationship with the things of the world. Just as he can discover the fact that the things of the earth possess him as much as he possesses them, and that his relationship with these things can prevent him from accomplishing his destiny as a man, a careful examination of his relationship with the things of the world may lead him to a liberation. The chains of the things of the world are indeed less conspicuous than those of the things of the earth, but their grip is far tighter. The chains that are the least visible are the hardest ones to break. Fortunately, wise men of old have already pointed out the way, and they have left a trail inside the world to guide us: texts, bits of language, showing us where to go.

⁷ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 206. English translation based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 207, but modified to better fit the present work.

2.2 Awareness of the Things of the World

The earth certainly is what man considers the most stable, the most reliable of all “things.” He will seldom doubt the impression left by the earth on his senses: to see, to touch, to hear, to smell, or to taste something is a sign that a tangible thing is present, that something *is*. More than the things of the sky, which are too distant to be approached, like the stars or a god, or too fleeting to be touched, like clouds, the things of the earth can easily be grasped, held, or played with. The things belonging to the third realm, the world, are nonetheless even more challenging, and this for a very simple reason: the world itself largely remains unseen by men, who are unaware of the very fact that they inhabit this realm, which allows them to experience the two others.

To break the chains of the things of the world, one must first become conscious of the existence of this world and see its nature. As each thing of the world acts as a lens that allows man to experience parts of the whole of the creation, formed by the earth, the world, and the sky, he must therefore first dis-cover the presence of these lenses in order to dis-cover the world itself. The easiest path toward such a dis-discovery certainly is to examine the most tangible, the earthliest parts of the world, that is, things of the world that can also be experienced by the senses, be heard by the ears and looked at with the eyes. The names of things of the earth well fit such a description: they are things of the world, but that represent parts of the earth, and themselves partly belong to it, as they can be represented as signifiers, in the form of words written on an earthly medium such as paper, in particular. Such physical, earthly representations of elements of the world allow man to attempt to grasp them with his mind, as if they were physical objects, things of the earth. This certainly is the most widely opened doorway toward the dis-discovery of the world.

The work of reflection focusing on the nature and the meaning of particular words is a task for the philosopher, as much as for the linguist. Such a work will nonetheless almost ineluctably lead the diligent philosopher to dis-discover more than what he hoped to find. Searching for the meaning of certain words, seeking to grasp parts of creation through these bits of the world, he will be forced to face a truth: the difference between the sign and what it refers to,

the discrepancy between the representations offered by the world and the parts of the earth and the sky that they represent. The realization of this fact is a crucial step, a milestone for the man walking on the path toward his liberation, the accomplishment of his nature, and it is no coincidence if the Chinese philosopher opens up the *Treatise on the Way and Virtue* with a sentence concerning this very question:

道可道，非常道。
 名可名，非常名。
 “The way that can be spoken of
 is not the eternal, unchanging way.
 The name that can be named,
 is not the eternal, unchanging name.”⁸

The one who attempts to understand the way through the use of reason, trying to bring it into the world by representing it with signs, building blocks of the world taking the form of words and sentences, is condemned to see his endeavor end in failure and to lament, frustrated by his impotence. His efforts may fail to produce the result he originally intended, but this does not mean that it was all in vain. Valuable lessons may come from it, and in particular the fact that the way, that is, what carries and guides the earth, the world, and the sky as a whole, differs from the representation that man has of it in his world. The eternal and unchanging way can be approached, but it cannot be grasped. It is condemned to remain ineffable, because the world is an artificial construction, a set of discrete things that are by their very nature finite and delimited, whereas the way is boundless.

The way is the grandest of things, and as such certainly the most ineffable of them all, but the discovery of the gap between signifier and signified, between the world and what it represents, is not limited to the way. Any thing that is designated with a name, inside the world, is condemned to become a caricature of itself. As parts of the whole, indistinguishable from it outside of the world, the things of the earth and of the sky will always be impossible

⁸ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉 老子 莊子上卷》, p. 11. TBA (Ch. 1).

to contain within names, building blocks of the world. When man gives a name to a thing or learns this name from other men, he believes that he has captured its essence and is able to grasp this thing by using this name. No matter whether he realizes it or not, the name nonetheless always fails to encompass the totality of the thing. It is always a mere image, a mirage that leads him to think that he not only understands these things, but that he also is master over them. He has built a thing of the world as the image of a thing of the earth or the sky, but the power that he holds over this image does not give him any power over the original thing that it represents. His dominion is restricted to the world, while the earth and the sky are only ruled by the way itself. He is the lord of the things of the world, but he is blind to the eternal and unchanging nature of the things that lie beyond its frontiers.

When cracks start to appear on the building blocks of the world, its unveiling can finally begin. Fissures in the lens through which man sees the earth and the sky not only allow him to become conscious of the presence and of the role played by this lens, it also reveals the fact that the earth and the sky may be different from what the world shows him of them. The more he tries to take hold of the way, within his world, the more it slips away. Endlessly analyzing its properties, restlessly debating with other philosophers concerning its nature, he loses the way and himself in sterile debates that lead him astray rather than bring him closer to it. Failing to deeply anchor what they build in a first-hand experience of the earth and the sky, they build the world to an increasingly higher altitude in order to attempt to seize the way, but their constructions are based on the fruit of their imagination rather than on their experience of the creation. Forgetting the impression left by their senses, they rely on “reason,” on their mind, neglecting to feel the earth and to look at the sky, which are constantly calling man to follow the way. Fortunately, the higher he builds, the more likely it is that his edifice will crumble under its own weight or that fissures will appear. When this occurs, the learned fool will start to build anew, reinforcing the structure with even more blocks and mortar, so that his next work would resist and finally reach its goal. The wise, on the other hand, will begin to question his method and his goal. He will use his favorite tool, his wit, to dis-cover the causes of his error, and if he is sufficiently diligent, he will face the truth that until now remained hidden in

plain sight from him: first, the nature of the world itself, and then, the inadequacy of the world, language in particular, to understand nature.

Under-standing is nonetheless itself contrary to the way. It represents a mental grasping, the worldly equivalent of what possession is to a thing of the earth. It is the very goal of the philosopher, the understanding of nature and the way, that prevents him from embracing it. Would this imply that the world is a prison that prevents us from experiencing the truth of nature and following the way? This is not the case. The world is the foundation upon which we stand, as human beings, and without it, any hope of embracing the way would be lost. We would then only be carried by it, passive beings, like animals caught in the torrent of the creation but blind to its nature, creatures that have no consciousness allowing them to oppose it. Would this imply that our language is simply too crude to encompass the truth of nature? Is language to blame for the inadequacy between the world on the one hand, and the earth and the sky, carried on the way, on the other? Zhuangzi offers us an insight concerning this question:

夫道未始有封，
言未始有常，
為是而有畛也。

“The way never had boundaries,
language never was stable and eternal;
It is because it is now the case
that there are borders.”⁹

Borders limit our field of vision. They impair our progress as we try to follow the way. These borders nonetheless are not intrinsic properties of the world, but rather the product of man’s desire to possess the things of the world, that is, his desire for under-standing. Neither the way nor language itself limits what man can see of the earth and the sky through the lens of the world. The root cause for the inadequacy between the world and the creation that it represents is to be found in man’s will rather than in the world itself. He has the power to shape his language,

⁹ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 28. TBA.

to be master over it. If his language caricatures the earth and the sky, imprisoning both inside little boxes that cannot contain their fullness, building blocks of the world, it is also because he, and his ancestors who have begun to build the world that he inherited, had an attitude toward the creation that was driven by the will to possess, to grasp it and to bring it to the world, his dominion, as a captive.

Other attitudes towards language are nonetheless possible. Man is not doomed to treat the things of the world as objects that he needs to under-stand, to grasp with his mind. Just as he can let go of the things of the earth and thereby begin to develop a new relationship with them, he can also learn that he can transform his world, and in particular his attitude toward language itself, so as to become a friend of the things of the world rather than a master. He can let these things of the world *be*, without trying to under-stand them, letting them remain somewhat undefined, without boundaries. If he succeeds in this endeavor, which will usually demand a long practice and a great openness of mind, then the borders separating man's mind from the way will begin to fade away. Language will cease to pretend to be stable and eternal, and it will be renewed, finding itself as it was in its infancy: a play between loosely defined representations of the earth and the sky, not attempting to grasp them but only to facilitate the encounter between them and mankind, and the sharing of personal experiences across large groups of people.

A dissolution of language, that is, a loosening of the bond keeping the building blocks of the world together and a blurring of the contours of these blocks, should therefore not be something to be feared, a source of anguish for men who feel more secure within well-defined boundaries, but rather be desired and welcomed. In order for such dissolution to occur, the most crucial step is the emergence of an awareness of the fact that, contrary to what most men are taught to believe, language is not necessarily a fortress, composed of rigid building blocks assembled according to definite rules. It is man's attitude toward language that causes its apparent rigidity. If he lets go of the things of the world, the world will become blurrier and more chaotic, but it will thereby more accurately represent the earth and the sky, nature, which displays a certain order as a totality, carried by the way, but is also composed of a myriad of things of the earth, of the world, and of the

sky, which are all part of a chaotic display of loose relationships and blurry boundaries when it is observed on a smaller scale, as a set of parts rather than a totality.

When one attempts to under-stand the things of the world, the things slip away or are crushed under the pressure of man's grip, but if he lets them be and is gentle as he approaches and touches them, they will reveal their true nature and guide man's eye, becoming lenses that show him the earth and the sky, without letting him believe that such a vision implies that he can either under-stand or possess what he has been allowed to behold. Before this can occur, a long and sinuous path will nonetheless have to be trodden.

Neither the world nor language is therefore to blame for man's failure to see the nature of the creation and his straying from the way. Man himself should not feel guilty of this shortcoming, since his nature pushes him to attempt to under-stand the creation, to attempt to grasp it using the world as a tool made to do so. Not to feel guilty nevertheless does not mean that he should be satisfied with this state of affairs. His nature leads him to grasp and to possess, but it also invites him, through man's natural inclination to introspection and self-awareness, to learn from his mistakes and to use the lessons that they teach in order to progress and to find the way.

Once man is aware of the inadequacy of his world, and has realized that he needs to radically transform his relationship with his language, he needs to find out what such a new relationship might be. The third patriarch of the Chan tradition, Jianzhi Sengcan (鑑智僧璨), tells us these words which may provide some guidance:

言語道斷，
非去來今。
“When the way of language is cut off,
there is no past, present, or future.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Original Chinese text from: 聖嚴. 《聖嚴說禪》. Dharma Drum Publishing Corp, 1996. P. 245 (Secondary quote from the 信心銘). TBA.

言語道斷
非去來今

The way of language (言語道¹¹) is not the way of the sky (天道¹²), that is, what encompasses and guides the sky, including all what it contains: the earth, life, and the world. It is an illusion, something that only exists in man's world. Language is neither *the* way nor *a* way. When man sees it as such, that is, as a path to be followed and that would lead him to a form of fulfillment, he condemns himself to run in circles inside a maze devised by his imagination, thereby persisting in his failure to see nature for what it is, giving more importance to the world, his creation, than to *the* creation itself. To make language a way is to believe that language will provide answers to the question of the nature of the creation and that the way of the sky can be found through its agency. The one who follows the way of language is inclined to put all his energy into the race for the edification of the world, as he believes that he can elevate himself using the world as a stairway that could reach up to the sky, allowing him to directly touch the way itself.

As the elevation of the world progresses, that is, as man builds up works of language to investigate nature, the follower of the way of language may come to realize that his endeavor will never help him reach the sky. The way will forever remain out of reach if he attempts to under-stand it with language. More than this, not only does his frenzied edification of the world fail to bring him closer to the sky, it also alienated him from its counterpart: the earth. Standing on top of the product of his thoughts and imagination, he finds himself farther away from the soil out of which he came to being than ever before. But the earth is more than the mother that gave birth to his kind. It represents his very flesh and all that he can experience with his senses. These experiences all represent interactions between man and the earth, perceived through the lens of the world that helps him to make sense of them. Having taken refuge in his own constructions, preferring to build fantasies in the world rather than to experience the earth, he lost touch with the ground, with what can be called "reality," and thereby also lost his way.

The earth is indeed carried by the sky, along the way. It is also what man can experience the most intimately, and as such,

¹¹ 【yán yǔ dào】.

¹² 【tiān dào】.

a direct contact with the earth itself, an anchorage of his life into the experience of his senses, may be what he needs to find the way and to follow it. But first, he must renounce the way of language. He must realize that it only makes him run in circles. The way of language may either break by itself, forcing man to abandon it, or man himself may be the one deliberately breaking and rejecting it. Different causes may induce this breaking down of the way of language, one of which may perhaps be seen in this quote attributed to Zhuangzi:

吾生也有涯，而知也無涯。
 以有涯隨無涯，殆已。
 已而為知者，殆而已矣。
 “Man’s life is limited but knowledge is unlimited.
 To pursue the unlimited with the limited
 is fatiguing;
 To know this but still pursue unlimited
 knowledge with limited life is fatal.”¹³

Adding block upon block as he unrelentingly builds up his world, man may come to realize that his enterprise will have no end. New blocks, new works of language, can always be created and added to the existing structure, and in this sense, the world is as boundless as the way itself, but each block, and the world itself, represent very limited depictions of something boundless and ineffable. Becoming aware of this, the builder of the world, the follower of the way of language, finally sees himself for who he truly is: Sisyphus, day after day busying himself with a fruitless work, an absurd enterprise. He is chasing something that cannot be caught, attempting to put a gust of wind into a cage by searching for the way in language. Seeing the futility of this, he can finally abandon the false teaching. Language is not a way, not the way, and not what will guide him toward the way by itself. It is only a skillful means, a steppingstone that he can use to liberate himself from the chains of the earth, the world, and the sky. Only once he

¹³ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 42. English translation based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 43, but modified to better fit the present work.

is free of them, ceasing from living under their yoke but without rejecting them, will he be able to embrace the way of the sky.

Once the awareness has grown, and the way of language has been left behind, the world can finally be reconciled with the earth and the sky. Language can cease to caricature them and instead light the way. As said by the third patriarch: "When the way of language is cut off, there is no past, present, or future." These three words are worldly concepts, describing the course of the sky, the flow of time, in its relationship with man's life. Once language is seen as a skillful means rather than a way, the importance of this threefold separation, so fundamental in man's world and universally found across the cultures and languages of the peoples of the earth, slowly fades away and the majesty of the sky can finally appear in its fullness. This represents a symbol: when man's relationship with language has been fixed, as he ceases to see it as a means to under-stand things, of grasping nature through cognition and reasoning, the race for the edification of the world can stop. Man can cease from attempting to under-stand nature by dissecting the whole. When cleverness and knowledge have been relinquished, what is left is only pure *presence*, what man can directly experience, now. The past and the future are subjects of study and reflection for the followers of the way of language, the architects of the world, but those who have left it behind to embrace the truth of nature, the way, have no use for them. They throw themselves entirely into the experience of the whole that is offered to them by the earth, their senses, and their world, joined in harmony by man's benevolence, by his absence of desire to grasp, to possess, or to under-stand.

Language is neither a way nor the way. It is a means through which man can achieve liberation, which will allow him to find and to follow the way. Language must therefore be observed before it can be tamed, and only then may it lead man toward the way, not as a slave serving a master, but rather as a friend giving a helping hand to someone dear. One must first behold the nature of the things of the world before being able to enter into a partnership with them, a partnership that will be key to those willing to embrace the way.

2.3 Examination of the Things of the World

The world is the lens through which man sees the earth, the world itself, and the sky, a lens that remains invisible to most inhabitants of this world. Once he has become aware of the presence of the lens, of the existence of the world and of the role it plays in man's life, comes the time for him to put a veil on the things of the earth, to hide the glaring sun that shines throughout the sky, only leaving a faint light so that the lens itself can be observed and its details be revealed. By looking at the distortions and blind spots induced by the imperfections or the very nature of the lens, the nature of his relationship with it can be disclosed to him. The examination of the world is a form of introspection, as the world is part of himself. It is one of the key elements of his human nature. The world is part of man, but it nonetheless is not contained by man. The world transcends his individuality and reaches through the horizon of his kind as a whole. His being is braided with the world, but this world is far larger than him and it exerts a strong power over his life. By observing the nature of the interactions between man and certain things of the world, this power-play can become apparent, first step allowing him to think of ways to find a balance between his own power and the one of the world, thereby allowing a harmony between man and the world to emerge.

Language certainly is the most easily apparent of the things of the world. Within language itself, the written word represents what is most easily grasped by man, as it is deeply rooted in the earth, into materiality. Contrary to fleeting words uttered or sung by a man's voice, which pass through the air before immediately fading into oblivion, the written word is carved into the earth and remains. It is etched on wood, carved on stone, or painted on parchment, fixed into rigid boundaries. A book or a scroll becomes a material object, part of the earth, which can therefore be possessed, handled, or stored like any other part of this realm. It is nonetheless also part of the world, conveying ideas, words, which transcend the earth and express something that can only be revealed in another realm: the world. Throughout history, books have been the storehouses of the things of the world, and the supporting pillars of this realm, allowing these things to be

shared across space, time, and peoples. They have allowed man to provide accounts of their experiences, so that what they have created or observed could be used by other men, living in other times and other places. They rapidly became the main means through which men became familiar with new parts of the world, that is, learned new “things.” The blessings of literacy nonetheless also came with several curses.

The love of language and books, in particular, can lead man astray from the way, even if he believes that it brings him closer to it. Zhuangzi gives us the following quote concerning the role played by books for the follower of the way:

北海若曰：

“井蛙不可以語於海者，拘於虛也；

夏蟲不可以語於冰者，篤於時也；

曲士不可以語於道者，束於教也。

The Sea God said:

“You cannot discuss the sea with a frog
at the bottom of a well because
it is confined to its dwelling place;

you cannot discuss ice with a summer moth
because it is limited to one season;

you cannot discuss the way with a bookworm
because he is restrained to the book
knowledge.”¹⁴

The philosopher here presents us with three different cases illustrating the fact that one cannot discuss something falling outside someone’s worldview, outside what he can imagine. Three different creatures are confronted with different limitations of their worldview: the first is limited by the earth, matter; the second by the work of the sky, time, and the third by a part of the world, books.

The frog at the bottom of a well cannot express an opinion concerning the sea, which it has never seen, because its horizon is

¹⁴ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 260. English translation based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 261, but modified to better fit the present work.

too small, and it cannot imagine the sea's vastness. The raging waves of the high seas during inclement weather have no equivalent in the well. The depths of the darkest seas can hardly be envisioned when one can reach the bottom of the water of the well within a few seconds at most. The opinion of the frog is vain as long as it remains a prisoner of the well, caught between its high and slippery wall. Only if it succeeds in using the gift bestowed onto it by nature itself, its long legs and lightweight body that is ideally made for a vertical jump, can it gain the freedom necessary to enlarge its horizon and perhaps someday discover the majesty of the seas. Then will the prisoner of the earth achieve true liberation, not only of its flesh but also of its mind.

A sign of the sky marks the time when the life of the summer moth can begin. As the sun appears more and more radiant with each new month of the spring, and the air blowing through the trees becomes warmer, the insect slowly emerges out of the shelter that allowed it to grow. Son of the sun, it ignores the frost of December, the snow of January. Born during the most clement time of the year, when the forces of the sky are strong and the fiery sphere high up in the heavens dominates the face of the earth, it knows not of the hardships of the winter, and never will, because its life will end together with the summer. The worldview of the frog in the well is limited by its walls, part of the earth, but the summer moth is limited by the sky itself. Its life is tied to a season, a wall in time that is even more impenetrable than the ones found on the earth. The concept of ice is therefore inconceivable for this insect, and it cannot understand what others would tell about it. Only if it was removed from the cycle of the season may the creature discover this peculiar phase of water, such as if a man decided to breed this kind of moth indoors during the fall, for example. Then would the insect be able to see and touch freezing, solid water, and thereby overcome the boundaries set by nature on its worldview.

According to Zhuangzi's quote, the bookworm, the learned, is also the subject of a similar limitation of his worldview. Here, the wall preventing man from being able to have a meaningful discussion concerning the way neither belongs to the earth nor the sky. It is a wall within his world, one not made of stone and mortar, but rather of ink and paper. As he spends his days with his eyes passing through pages and volumes, his mind becomes blind to the

nature of the earth and the sky. Following the way of language, seeking answers in the product of other men's imagination rather than in the experience of nature itself, he alienates himself from the way. When it is made into an idol, language itself becomes a wall hiding the truth of nature rather than a guide toward an enlightenment. Here, however, it is not language as a whole that is pointed out as detrimental to man's relationship with the way, but only the written word, whose peculiarities demand to be examined in more detail.

A book, like an oral discourse, is a thing of the world, a work of language whose meaning is neither found in the earth nor the sky, but only in man's mind. There are nonetheless several important distinctions between orality and literacy, and the two mediums play a different role in his life. Oral speech normally is conducted between people who are close to one another. It is a living work of language, with words disappearing into the air and the ears as soon as they are uttered, leaving only a trace in man's memory, if they are deemed worthy. Dialogue is almost always possible between the one who speaks and the one who hears. It offers the occasion of mutual interactions between individuals and a confrontation of ideas and worldviews.

In contrast with this, the written word appears more rigid. It does not allow an immediate dialogue,¹⁵ as the author of the text is rarely present together with the one reading it. He may even have ceased to exist, and have returned to the earth ages ago, like the aforementioned Chinese philosophers. The meaning of the text is therefore open to interpretation, and it is the reader alone who will have to make sense of any ambiguity. His interpretation may then be completely different from the meaning intended by the author, and the reader would have no way to realize this or to be corrected. The written word does not allow man to play with language as fluidly and rapidly as an oral dialog could. Letters and words also cut off a large part of what makes the richness of oral speech: the tone of a voice, the intonations of sentences that convey feelings that are not transcribed in writing, or even facial expressions or gestures that are as much part of the language as the words themselves. All of this is simplified and disappears

¹⁵ The advent of instantaneous electronic communications now often blurs some of the traditional differences between orality and literacy, but the contrast between texts and dialogue nonetheless remains.

when oral speech is put on paper. The written word nonetheless also possesses a richness of its own: calligraphic style, punctuation or ideograms, which provide new layers of meaning which are unreachable with oral language, but this complementarity does not nullify the fact that a favoring of the written word and a neglect of oral speech impoverish man's world, because they diminish its liveliness, its vitality. It is this vitality and fluidity of language, the play and dialogue between different men, that allows the world to stay in close contact with the earth and the sky. An oral dialogue may appear less earthly than a book, but the action of speaking and hearing is nonetheless more deeply anchored in the experience of both earth and sky. An oral dialogue may appear evanescent, ephemeral, but it resonates throughout the sky and its waves will someday reach the most distant stars, whereas the book may pass through the ages, but it will forever remain a prisoner of the frame formed by its pages.

The danger presented by literacy for the follower of the way is nonetheless not the book themselves, but rather their abuse. Just as language can be made into an idol, transformed into a "way" to be followed, the written word may cease to become a tool for the diffusion and fixation of language and instead become an object of worship, a treasure that is coveted and possessed, thereby entrapping man and making him a slave to the things of the world, a servant of the books that he reads and accumulates. This is why the philosopher tells us that the way is inaccessible to the bookworm.

The main danger of literacy resides in the absence of limitation of the number of texts or their length. A conversation is necessarily linear, and one cannot spend all his time speaking and discussing with other men, as this would simply be too exhausting, and few would be willing and able to engage in such protracted dialogues. Books, on the other hand, are always available. They now come in an almost unlimited quantity, and each one of them may take several days or even weeks to read. This plentiful nature of the written word is like a bottomless pit that entices man with promises of wisdom, knowledge, and revelation of the nature of things. In a way, books are plainer than the earth and the sky, whose signs are entirely open to interpretation, whereas books offer him ready-made explanations of the things of nature and the nature of things. They allow him to learn without the need of

thinking, but he remains unable to distinguish whether what he learns is based on the reality of the earth, the sky, and the way, or if it only represents the product of someone's imagination, a thing of the world completely disconnected from the earth and the sky. Sinking into the pit whose walls are made of sheets of paper, with ink as their mortar, the bookworm loses sight of the sky above him, and thereby also of the way of the sky that carries all. He searches for it in the world, in language, forgetting to raise his eyes toward it and to experience its embrace, ignoring nature, which teaches the way to those who make their senses available, those who listen and look for the signs in the sky and on the earth.

The casual book reader should therefore be distinguished from the bookworm. Literacy may be a means to guide man toward the way, but to overindulge in reading may cause him to stray further away from it. The *Blue Cliff Record* tells us something concerning this matter:

淺聞深悟，
深聞不悟，
謂之絕學。

“Shallow learning, deep enlightenment;
Deep learning, no enlightenment”
This is called “cutting off study.”¹⁶

This quote concerns learning in general, but it also accurately represents both a benefit of literacy and one of its dangers. When books are used with parsimony, taking care to relate what is learned with one's personal experience of the earth and the sky, they can be a source of enlightenment, pointing out the way. On the other hand, when man throws himself entirely, mind and body, into the bottomless pit of science and knowledge, he condemns himself to remain in darkness, unable to see the light and to find the way.

The light only passes through the narrow gap between earth and world. The way only shines and reveals itself on the horizon, on the line separating and joining the “meaningless” experience

¹⁶ Original Chinese text from: 吳平, 《新譯碧巖集(上)》, p. 490. English translation from: Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 265 (44th case).

of the earth, as “meaning” only appears within the world, and the “intangible” knowledge of the world. Man needs the world, in the form of language and books, in particular, to make sense of his own experience of the earth and the sky, but this world must remain anchored deep into the earth, into a sensory experience, in order to be meaningful. The horizon separating the two is where the light appears, as a rising or setting sun shining throughout the firmament and illuminating the skin of the earth. Neither embracing literacy as a direct means of enlightenment nor rejecting it as something useless, the follower of the way stays in between the two realms, joining both to harness their power, so that they may show him the way.

The shallow waters of the world, its part in close contact with the earth, are the locus of man’s enlightenment. The learned dives into the depths but soon loses sight of the light of the sky. If the learned is also wise, he therefore weans himself from his desire for knowledge before drowning in it. Depth of meaning, depth of the world, is usually considered something valuable and worthy of being pursued, but the discovery and following of the way is neither “ordinary” nor “easy,” even though it can be seen as “simple.” The way can only be approached by man’s conscience through a constant balancing of world and earth, mind and body, cognition and sensation, and such an equilibrium between the two realms, embodied in man himself, precludes him from venturing too deeply into either one of them. To sink into the abyss of the earth and the sky implies that he loses touch with the world, and becomes like a beast, devoid of reason, only listening to its senses and instincts. To descend into the depths of the world implies that man progressively severs himself from the earth and the sky, plunging into the fruit of the imagination and cognition of all the builders of the world but thereby also becoming blind to its truth, becoming someone unable to distinguish the reality of the creation from the fantasy of men, incapable of discerning which things of the world are rooted in the earth and which ones have no other basis than man’s mind. The way therefore demands that man embrace these shallow waters, the surface that separates and joins the realms instead of exploring the depths, but even there, he must remain watchful.

Certainty and confidence are enemies of the follower of the way. What the world holds dear, the pillars keeping it standing,

may rest on quicksand or thin air, and man must therefore be ready to test these foundations of the world in order to find the way, the truth of the earth, the world, and the sky. As said by the following Chinese proverb:

大疑大悟，
小疑小悟，
不疑不悟。
“Great doubt, great enlightenment.
Little doubt, little enlightenment.
No doubt, no enlightenment.”¹⁷

The way of the sky does not demand blind faith, as most men need to *know* something before putting their trust in it, and the way is not something that can be known, but only glimpsed from afar and followed. Faith leaves no place for uncertainty, for indeterminateness, but the way embraces those things. It exalts ambivalence, which is linked to the constant need to find harmony, an equilibrium between forces that are at odds with each other that characterizes the way. Therefore, whereas religion demands faith, to follow the way instead requires doubt.

Strongly held opinions and beliefs represent idols of the world, things that are considered to be absolutely true, rigid stone blocks that will serve as foundations for other parts of the world, without these foundations necessarily being secure and stable, that is, rooted in the truth of nature, in the earth and the sky. These idols of the learned are the equivalent of the pile of gold and jade of the rich man, things that man possesses and that possess him, binding him to these rigid pieces of the world. To the inflexibility and stillness of faith and certainty, attributes of religion, the way favors doubt, vagueness, and motion. If religion is a stone pillar, an imposing tree standing erect in the middle of a furious torrent of water, undisturbed, unbent, and unbroken, the way of the sky is a gentle breeze carrying a puff of smoke, a whirlwind in which clouds are caught and disappear before emerging as something new, or a storm scattering a myriad of grains of sand all over the earth. It cannot be contained, cannot be pointed out, and cannot stand

¹⁷ Traditional saying. TBA.

still. It is permanently fluctuating, fleeing the grip of man's hands and of his mind, and therefore cannot be apprehended using the tools of the world, because man's world is built to grasp, to define, and to contain, qualities that go against the nature of the way. This is why doubt is an essential key for the one seeking liberation from the chains of the world, which prevent him from following the way.

Nothing should fall outside the range of man's doubt, not even doubt itself. One should nonetheless keep in mind the fact that all that man experiences and thinks passes through the lens of the world and that, therefore, even his experience of the earth, the sky, and the way itself, is mediated by it. The truth of these experiences thus largely depends on the truth of his world, on the fact that it is grounded in reality and not simply is a fantasy. This is why it is the things of the world that should be doubted. The vision that they offer should be unceasingly questioned and proved. Doing so, the world can be transformed to offer a more accurate vision of the earth and the sky. Polishing the lenses of the world can allow the light of the sky to penetrate more deeply into the world, and thereby illuminate man's consciousness.

Among the things of the world that are to be doubted if one is to be enlightened, man's language certainly occupies the most prominent place. Philosophy, in particular, represents a domain where the idolization of words and concepts is omnipresent and leads to a subversion of its purpose. An ever-increasing inflation of technical terminology, and a progressive acceptance of these terms into the very basis of man's world, lure man into devoting more and more of his precious time on the earth to reflect upon the nature of concepts that have no real ground in nature, things of the world that have no contact with the earth and the sky, but only represent worldly constructions devised by men and now worshipped as idols. Concepts like the "soul," the "good," or even a "god" are not devoid of usefulness, and they may help man shed some light on some of his own experiences of nature or his life, but they remain things of the world, things whose basis is relatively shaky, and that should be questioned if what they represent is found not to correspond to the truth of nature. To doubt is neither to embrace nor to reject, it is simply to remain undecided, to prevent the necrosis of the world, the fossilization of things, and to encourage it to be alive, in flux, always changing and being

refined, so that the truth may appear and be seen.

At least as important as to doubt the things of the world is to doubt the dweller of the world itself. Man and his world are indeed intertwined, as a man would not be a man without this world. He himself is a thing of the world, which can be the object of doubt. To doubt the world is to doubt himself, and to doubt himself is to doubt the world. This doubt implies that one does not hold on tightly to any thing of the world, including one's own self. The man doubting the world knows that his representation of the earth, the sky, and the way is fallible, that it is a mere caricature that does not do justice to their majesty. He knows that he cannot simply reject the world and flee away from it, as it is part of himself, but by refusing to hold on to the things of the world, he can begin to take a glimpse of the light of the way passing between these things. The more he lets them go, the more this light can find its way and reach his eyes, guiding him toward the accomplishment of his own being.

The way cannot be found within the boundaries of the world, but the world can lead its dwellers toward its threshold. When the nature of the things of the world has been accurately perceived, they can become a source of enlightenment rather than things concealing the way. As told by the “founder” of Chan, Bodhidharma:

大道寂號無相，
萬象窈號無名。
如斯運用自在，
總是無心之精。

“The Great Way is formless in essence.
All the things are nameless in nature.
Bear it in mind and you'll be at ease.
That's the essence of what's called no mind.”¹⁸

The way is more than a “path,” and it cannot be accurately imagined by a human mind. The way is larger than what is designated by the word “way.” This is also true of the myriad of things contained within the firmament, including the things of the earth:

¹⁸ Original Chinese text and English translation from: 蔡志忠, 《蔡志忠漫画中国传统文化经典: 达摩禅 (中英文对照版)》, p. 300.

the names that they bear are only labels, signs pointing out their nature, but these signs differ from what they designate. The way, the sky, the earth, and the myriad of things had no name until man bestowed them one. Nature itself gives no name and has no need for them. Names divide what is united in nature, chipping away the one into a myriad of things, which are thereby erroneously seen as independent from each other. Language certainly is the most powerful weapon wielded by man, one that may injure him as much as it can save him, but more important than the weapon itself, is the mind of the man wielding it.

The first step is to keep in mind the presence of the gap between the world and the things of the world on the one hand, and the earth, the sky, and the way on the other, that is, to always be conscious of the difference between the signifier and the signified; words or concepts and what they designate. Constantly keeping this in mind, being mindful of the difference between what the world allows him to see and the truth of nature, man will spontaneously let go of his desire for worldly understanding, as he realizes that what he yearns for cannot be found within the limits of the world. Having let go of this desire, the fetters binding him to the things of the world will naturally grow looser. He will finally be at ease, and he will not be tempted to dive into the depths of world, to follow the way of language.

Once he is at ease, having relinquished his own will and desires, and enjoying the peace of the one who is free from the servitude of the world, he may see the trail formed by the things of the world, the trail leading to the threshold of the way. These things, these signs, can become milestones showing him where he should go rather than anchors preventing him from moving, but he must first be able to discern these milestones from the numerous stumbling blocks that are present in the world. He must follow what guides him toward the truth of nature, and turn his back on what leads him into the pit of vain, worldly understanding. As said by the Chan master Linji Yixuan (臨濟義玄):

幻化空花，不勞把捉；
得失是非，一時放卻。

“Illusory transformations, flowers in the sky—
Don’t trouble to grasp at them.
Gain and loss, right and wrong—
Away with them once and for all!”¹⁹

If man sees flowers in the sky, he knows that what he sees is a hallucination, because flowers do not belong to the sky. Any attempt to grasp them is bound to fail, thereby breaking and revealing the illusion. Likewise, if man believes that he sees the way within the boundaries of the world, he can be sure that he is mistaken, as the way does not belong to the world. More generally, this is also true of most of the things of the world that represent things of the earth and the sky and lead man to believe that to grasp these things of the world would be equivalent to the grasping of what they represent on the earth or in the sky. Just as he should refrain from trying to grasp flowers in the sky, he should abstain from attempting to grasp the things of the world.

Man may be enslaved by the things of the world that he attempts to grasp and possess, but these things are not the only dangers of the world. Besides words and names, besides things themselves, he is indeed constantly tempted to evaluate these things: their place within the hierarchy of the world, and also relative to himself. He is easily tricked by the world itself, which he received as an inheritance from his forefathers and brethren and into which he was thrown at birth, into believing that the structure that it forms, the hierarchy of things and values that it displays, represents an objective element of nature, whereas it mostly is a mere reflection of the collective opinion of a group of men of influence, the builders of the world.

To be caught in the endless and fruitless cycle of judgment and hierarchization of the world is very similar to being possessed by the things of the world themselves. To spend his days counting gains and losses, his own or the ones of others, is the same as to

¹⁹ Original Chinese text from: 義高 入矢. 《臨濟錄》. 岩波書店, 1989. P. 114. English translation from: Linji-yixuan. *The Record of Linji*. U of Hawaii P, 2009. P. 26.

spend time counting riches that he does not really possess. Trying to separate right from wrong, he only reshapes the world, reorganizes the constructions of other men, but he does not progress toward an unveiling of the way or a disclosure of the essence of nature. A mind focused on gains and losses (勝負之心²⁰) is condemned to endlessly tilt at windmills, exploring the details of the world but forever blind to the nature of the earth, the sky, and the way. The wise follower of the way will therefore learn to let go of judgments, just as he lets go of the things of the world themselves.

Then, man may be blessed with enlightenment. The *Diamond Sutra*, an Indian Buddhist treatise whose Chinese translation occupies a prominent place among the scriptures read by Chan followers in China, tells us one of the conditions for this to occur:

若見諸相非相，即見如來。
 “When you see that all forms and appearances
 are non-forms and non-appearances,
 you see *the one who has arrived in such fashion*
 (the Awakened).”²¹

Forms and appearances are the things of the world, and here in particular, the things that represent what belongs to the earth and the sky. They are the lens through which man sees the creation, but if he gains awareness of the difference between these things of the world and the creation that is both hidden and revealed by these things, he may come to realize that these “forms and appearances” are not what they seem, that they are “non-forms and non-appearances,” that is, that they do not exist as such, that they are not part of the earth and the sky, but only signs existing only within the world, within his mind.

What is represented by the “forms and appearances” indeed exists, but not as such. The things of the world allow man to become aware of their presence. They are “signs” pointing out what lies beyond the frontiers of the world, but the vision that they

²⁰ [shèng fù zhī xīn].

²¹ Original Chinese text from: 蔡志忠, 《蔡志忠漫画中国传统文化经典: 达摩禅 (中英文对照版)》, p. 175. The English translation is based on the one found in the same book, but it has been modified to better fit the present work.

offer is a distorted one, leading him to think that he understands the earth and the sky, while he remains a prisoner of his world. The distortion may nonetheless appear, and his consciousness may suddenly be struck with enlightenment concerning his condition. He may see the thing of the world for what it is, and see that the form of a thing of the earth or the sky differs from the thing itself.

When enlightenment has occurred, man may begin to peer beyond the limits of the world. He may begin to experience the whole that was hidden behind the parts, not thinking of it as a set of things within the world, using his mind to model the creation, but rather using his senses, turning off his capacity to compute and dissect and letting himself be guided by his body, letting the light of the sky carry a vision of the whole into his eyes, without the mediation of the world. Then will *the one who has arrived in such fashion* appear to him, an expression usually seen as a mere synonymous to the "Buddha," the Awakened, but whose peculiar meaning is far from fortuitous, and wider than it may appear.

What is seen when one succeeds in experiencing the earth, the sky, and the way, beyond forms and appearances, beyond the lens of the world, is the unveiling of the whole *as it is*, without mediation, without separation, and without cognition. The whole comes to the man who has freed it and himself from the burden of the world, who has stripped away all ornaments and falsehood, so that the truth can finally appear, laid bare for him to see. The Awakened does not differ from the whole. It does not separate the self from the other. It is blind to things, as its eyes are bathed in the blazing light of the sky, seeing only the way in which he is carried. It is not a man, but rather what remains when man has been freed from his self and from the grip of the things of the world.

A very concise summary of the path toward such enlightenment has been given by Boddidharma himself:

不立文字，
教外別傳，
直指人心，
見性成佛。

“A special transmission, separate from
doctrinal teachings, and not founded upon
words and letters.

Pointing directly to man’s mind,
it lets one see the essence and [thus]
attain Buddhahood.”²²

In the original Chinese, it begins with the mention of the fact that the path to follow is not to be found in books or scrolls. Literally, one should “not stand” (不立) upon words and letters, that is, one should not set his foot, and thereby his whole body, upon something that does not have a sure basis, something that can slip away and cause man to stumble and fall. Language will be used as part of the guidance of the disciple by the master, but orality is preferred, for its flexibility, its impermanence, and the fact that it favors dialogues and interactions.

What the master passes on to the disciple is not a doctrine (教²³) that should be learned without reflection. It is not a religion that should be blindly followed, and it is not a teaching that can be transmitted from mouth to ear. It falls outside of the tradition from which it emerged and demands that the disciple emancipates himself from the traditions and doctrines that he received in inheritance, often from the day of his birth, if they are found to lack ground; if their roots are not deeply secured into the earth. The master will not tell him where to go, but rather walk in front of him, showing him rather than teaching him. What the disciple will receive is not a form of instruction, based on language or even thinking, but rather an attitude, a transformation of his own being, through a practice, whose success will largely depend on the disciple’s openness to the way itself, and on his capacity to liberate himself from his chains, the ones of the earth, the world, or the

²² Original Chinese text from: 蔡志忠, 《蔡志忠漫画中国传统文化经典: 达摩禅 (中英文对照版)》, p. 286. The English translation is based on the one found in the same book, but it has been modified to better fit the present work.

²³ 【jiào】.

sky.

The path guides man toward a dis-covery of himself. Without the mediation of language or doctrines, the master points out the nature of his mind, pointing out its contradictions, in particular. The condition of his mind remains unknown to him, until he begins to see the nature of the world that he inhabits, and of which his mind is captive. The master points out the cracks in the structure of his world, as well as its limits, inviting the disciple to a realization of his captivity and of the deceitfulness of the world. This realization is the first step toward liberation. Seeing his mind in chains, the yearning for freedom can now grow, and he can begin to search for a way to escape from the servitude of the world and to open his eyes.

If the work of the master has borne fruit, the disciple will progressively begin to see the light of the sky, and the way itself. The essence of his own self will appear, and he will see that this essence is the whole of nature itself. He will cease to distinguish the parts from the whole, the self from the other, and he will awaken from his long sleep. All the boundaries will fade, and the path itself will disappear, along with himself.

These words of the Indian sage are nonetheless only an invitation. They are not meant to be extensively meditated upon, and not meant to become a doctrine or a creed. They are only a trail of words meant to lead the one following them to the threshold of the way, to begin a practice that would allow the follower to go beyond the limits of the world, the boundaries of what can be said with words and letters. Once the nature of the things of the world has been perceived, comes the time for the release of the things of the world, and of the chains that bind man to it.

2.4 The Release of the Things of the World

Liberation from the yoke of the things of the earth may not be achieved by a great number of men, but it is nonetheless very straightforward: one must just open up his hands, open the doors of his vault, or unlock his fence and let his burden be carried away by others. These things of the earth will tend to disappear by themselves if their owner simply refrains from holding on to them or protecting them. If many remain burdened with these things until their last breath, it is only because they do not have the will to let them go and not because it is too complicated to do.

The release of the things of the earth is the first step toward a complete liberation of man from the tyranny of things. The second step is far more difficult, requiring not only the will to free oneself, but also an ability to see one's own nature, and the nature of the world in which man is condemned to live. A first difficulty arises from the fact that most men are largely unaware of the fact that their world is not limited to the vision of the earth and the sky that their senses offer them. Man sees the creation through the lens of the world, but he is blind to the lens itself, to its presence, its nature, and its effects. His cecity to the world renders him unable to distinguish the things of the world from those of the earth, and he cannot free himself from a prison whose walls are invisible to him. Many will nonetheless gain an awareness of the nature of the world and peer into its mechanisms, but this will not necessarily be enough to achieve liberation from it.

A second major difficulty, which is peculiar to the things of the world, is the fact that even when one is conscious of their presence and of their nature, one may simply not be able to release them. Man's power over the things of the world is indeed different than the one he enjoys over the things of the earth. On the one hand, man exerts far greater control over certain parts of the world than over most parts of the earth. He can create and build in the world *ex nihilo*, transform the fruit of his imagination into words, stories, pictures, which all become part of his world and may be shared with others, whereas on the earth he must face a large number of constraints that limit what he can do. On the other hand, man's relationship with the things of the world is far more complicated than the one with the things of the earth. Man may not be able

to create new parts of the earth, but he can handle the things belonging to it with his hands, and see them clearly with his eyes. To acquire them, he only needs to grab them, and he can release them simply by throwing them away. It is not so in the world, as the things belonging to this realm do not have definite boundaries. Man's mind cannot take hold of them in the same manner that he can seize a physical, earthly object, and he also cannot simply throw these worldly things away or destroy them with the swing of a hammer, but this does not mean that he has no way to release them, simply that this release will need to be like the world itself: subtle, sketchy, and impermanent.

The earth is a realm of beautiful simplicity and straightforwardness, and it is because of this that other things, such as life or the world itself, can be built upon it. The world, on the other hand, is chaotic, blurry, and complex. These qualities allow man to transcend the earth and the sky through the world, but as his own essence is mixed with the very fabric of this world, complete liberation from it becomes impossible, not without losing his "humanity." Man is therefore condemned to be chained to his world if he wants to remain a man, but this does not mean that he cannot loosen the chains and gain more freedom from it.

One of the surest paths leading to more freedom from the world is to nurture greater contact with the earth. This means to try to experience it without letting this experience being mediated by the world, disconnecting one's reason, one's cognition, to focus on a purely sensory experience: touching, seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting, without putting this experience in relation with others from the past, without analyzing it, without associating it with other things. Man's weight must rest on something, and if he wants to free himself from the grip of the world, the earth is there to provide him with support. This is nonetheless easier said than done. It will demand long practice, and often the guidance of someone who has already trodden this path.

Another way toward liberation from the yoke of the things of the world is to cut off the bond linking man to them one by one, using the building blocks of the world as knives. Language is a powerful but dangerous weapon, one that can prevent man from running away from the world, but also one that can be used to shatter its weakest links. Language can be used to shed light on

language's weaknesses, and therefore also on the shaky foundations of the world, parts of which can then be deconstructed to free man from them. As things of the world themselves, individual words and language as a whole can be released by man, but far from meaning that one would abandon language and take refuge and comfort in contemplative silence, this implies a true dis-covery of language, not as something controlled by man or that controls him, but rather as a partner that can be played with and accompany man on the way.

Before man can enter in a partnership with the things of the world, including language, man must first learn how to release them, offering them the freedom he desires for himself, so that they may reciprocate. Once again, the ancient Chinese philosopher will light the path in front of us, showing us where to start:

為學日益，為道日損。
 “In the pursuit of learning,
 every day something is acquired.
 In the pursuit of the way,
 every day something is dropped.”²⁴

This sentence touches on the apparent strangeness of the life of the follower of the way with a needle. Learning certainly is among the worldly activities that are the most universally praised, even by those who despise the superficiality and vanity of most of the world, among the followers of most religions, in particular. To learn new things, new parts of the world, is considered to be a path guiding men toward all kinds of success: to the religious or the intellectual, it brings spiritual elevation; to the greedy, it brings a more lucrative work or business opportunities, and to those who are seeking to reach the top of the social ladders, it brings power. To learn is to conquer new parts of the world, appropriating new things that increase the extent of one's dominion in this world.

Learning never ends, as the world knows no boundaries: it can be indefinitely expended through the creation of new things,

²⁴ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 86. English translation based on the one found in: Lao Tzu, *The Tao Teh Ching*, np. but modified to better fit the present work (Ch. 48).

為學日益
為道日損

which can be learned by all men. The student therefore acquires new things with each passing day, accumulating them within his mind. Contrary to the world, which is boundless, his capacity to store things of the world in his mind is limited, but just like one can continue to pour water in an overflowing jug, man can always continue to learn. This accumulation of things of the world nonetheless also produces the same effects as one concerning things of the earth. Man's memory may become similar to the storehouse where the rich man accumulates jewels and precious metals, and the things that he lets inhabit his mind may slowly begin to take ownership of their dwelling. Man can be enslaved by the things that he learns, which may be like trojan horses, entering his mind with promises of wisdom, prosperity, or power, and then take hold of his brain, transforming man into their slave, their protector, someone who will spend his days preventing their vanishing and cherishing them as idols made of the finest materials.

An example of the way by which things of the world may come to enslave the one learning them may be found in the learning of foreign languages. The learning of a language comes as a long process, during which one becomes familiar with thousands upon thousands of words, discovering and memorizing them one by one, until they become part of his world(s), things through which he can see the creation and build new things. Each new language is like a new world of its own, a new home, but also often a new prison. This great collection of words, sounds, and grammar rules indeed demands as much as it offers. This new home only stands as long as man takes care of it. If left unattended, the work of the sky, that is, the passing of time, will cause it to fall to the ground and to vanish without a trace. Words that are not used or actively remembered are slowly forgotten, and when a great number of these building blocks of language disappear, it is the language as a whole that is under threat.

Having invested countless hours in order to master a language, the learner will more often than not be attached to his newly acquired skill. If it is not practiced regularly, it will be forgotten, and therefore he is forced by his attachment to these things of the worlds to continue to review, to learn them anew so that they would not be taken away from him by the work of the sky, thereby rendering vain all the time and effort he invested to make them part of his world. Each word that he has learned now holds power

over him, because he made them *his*, he has possessed them, and now they possess him. The learner will work for them, often during the rest of his life, patiently spending time to take care of them, so that they will not fade away into oblivion.

Learning allows man to build up his world, but the accumulation of things that it entails alienates man from the earth upon which it rests and from the sky that it faces. The more he learns, the farther he gets from following the way of the sky, as freedom from things is a prerequisite for those wishing to embrace it, and one cannot be free if he possesses and is possessed by many things of the earth or the world. In order to get closer to the way and to live according to the flow of nature, he must let go of the things of the earth that he acquired, and must release the things of the world that he has learned.

The world and the way stand against one another, and man must make a choice: which one of them will he serve? Man's relationship with the two is like an hourglass: the more he learns, that is, the more he accumulates things of the world, the more he grows distant from the way, and conversely, the closer he is to the way, the less he will be attached to the things of the world. The world represents the fruit of man's intellect and of the collective ego of mankind, what is "artificial," man-made, what stands out from the earth and the sky. The way, on the other hand, represents the course of nature, what grows and decays organically, without will and without self. In order to embrace the way, he must therefore relinquish part of himself, part of his world, accepting to stand out less from the flow of nature so that he may enjoy greater proximity with it. To embrace the way thus implies that things that have been learned must be forgotten and that parts of the world must be deconstructed. This nonetheless does not necessarily require that man take an active part in this process. Following the way indeed implies that he ceases to actively try to "fix" the creation, and rather lets things go so that nature itself may take away where there is an excess and fill where there is a lack.

The way of the sky fixes all imbalances naturally, letting time do its work. Once man decides to let the things of the world that he holds dear go, he does not need to do anything in order for them to go away. The work of the sky, the flow of time, will naturally erode the superfluous structures and things of the world, like a strong

wind that patiently carves through stone and mortar, ultimately causing entire buildings to be swallowed back by the earth. This erosion will nonetheless be limited, only concerning the outskirts of this world, the parts that man does not inhabit permanently, parts that he does not need in order to live his life on earth. He may forget the name of obscure plants in a dead language that he has learned during his youth spent on school benches, simply because he will have no need of this knowledge, but he will nonetheless not forget how to perform basic calculus, how to read, or how to cook. The follower of the way may let many superfluous things go, but he will still always remain a dweller of the world rather than a beast living solely on the earth, or a purely spiritual being that would transcend earth and sky. Large sections of his world will remain intact, unaffected by the work of the sky, and man will continue to use them. Having unlearned everything that could be unlearned, he will be fully satisfied with the humblest dwelling, a world reduced to its core, modest and simple. The modest nature of this dwelling will not invite any attachment, or any fear that it would be taken away from him. Having only what he needs, what remains is what cannot be taken away by the work of the sky, what cannot be forgotten, not without losing his own life. He will therefore enjoy serenity, a freedom that is reserved for those who only have what they cannot lose.

The release of the things of the world is therefore the starting point of a reduction in the size of this world, which will slowly be depleted from its parts that are not really necessary for man's life, parts that can be done away with. With each passing day, things of the world will be forgotten, without man noticing their disappearance. He only notices that the chains binding him to his world will grow looser and looser, and that his newfound freedom from the world allows him to re-dis-cover the earth and the sky, and to grow closer to them and to what guides them throughout time and space: the way itself.

The things of the world are nonetheless not a mere burden that man would want to get rid of but simply would be condemned to carry further. They also are what allows him to see the nature of the way and to become conscious of the need for him to release the things of the world in order to embrace the way. As Bodhidharma tells us:

因筌求魚，得魚忘筌；
因言求意，得意忘言。
既稱念佛之名。

“If you use a trap to catch fish,
once you succeed, you can forget the trap.
And if you use words to find meaning,
once you find it, you can forget words.”²⁵

This utilitarian vision of language, proposed by the Indian sage, is worthy of being examined but it should not necessarily be blindly accepted. It can give us some insight concerning its nature, but it may also just as well conceal some of the peculiarities that make it unique. The examination of the difference between words and the trap will therefore be as important as the one of their similitudes.

A fish-trap is an earthly object that is designed and constructed with a sole purpose: to catch fish. It is devoid of any use in the absence of any fish, and once man has satisfied his needs, either eating or selling these fish, he no longer has need of it.

In the same manner, man can use language to seek knowledge, to understand things. Reading or debating with his peers, he can attempt to find answers to the questions that occupy his mind. A cooking book can allow him to get acquainted with the recipe for a particular dish. He can use this knowledge provided by someone else to develop a practice, to learn how to make this dish. Once he has mastered this recipe and remembers its different steps, he can then give away the book or simply put it away, as it has now become superfluous. The same would be true of scholarly or spiritual books or discourses that are created to guide the newcomers looking to embrace the way, but with one major difference: whereas it will be obvious to the cook that he no longer needs the book because he has succeeded in cooking the food he intended to prepare, the man seeking spiritual fulfillment through worldly learning, through language, will often be tempted to hold on to it because his appetite for knowledge will never be fully satisfied. One may point out the path as clearly as possible with a finger,

²⁵ Original Chinese text and English translation from: 蔡志忠, 《蔡志忠漫画中国传统文化经典: 达摩禅 (中英文对照版)》, p. 259.

因筌求魚
得魚忘筌

因言求意
得意忘言

and the disciple may yet lose himself by contemplating the finger rather than walking the path itself.

The danger inherent to the use of language as a guide to follow the way is that one will easily become blind to the separation between the world on the one end, and the earth and the sky on the other. The way is the way of the sky, not the one of the world. Man's world only exists within his own mind, and a revelation of the way will not occur inside the world itself but rather on the earth and in the sky. The world has its purpose, which is to provide guidance, to be a roadmap pointing out the direction of the way, but this knowledge must be put into practice, on the earth and in the sky, in order to bear fruit and to lead man to a revelation. If he searches for the way within the world itself, he is condemned to fail, to endlessly search for something that is not there. He may spend years and decades arguing with others concerning the best route to discover the way, and he may waste his eyes reading sky-high stacks of books to find what stood right in front of him all along.

Care must therefore be taken to distinguish the difference between the earth, the sky, and the way on the one hand, and the representation that the world offers of them on the other, that is, the difference between the sign and what it designates. The world in general, and language in particular, may show man the way, but it will nonetheless only be found outside of the world. This knowledge acquired within the world must be brought back to the earth and the sky, to the reality of the material, sensible realm, rather than remain a metaphysical idea. This knowledge must be forged into a practice. The roadmap must be used, during a real journey throughout the earth and not simply be part of a collection of worldly things that remain isolated from the other realms. If the traveler, equipped with this map, succeeds in reaching his destination, he will no longer have need of it. Once the destination has been reached, the map can be discarded. When the way has been perceived and embraced, he can let go of all the worldly knowledge that guided him until now. He no longer needs the world and its words, but he may nonetheless still continue to use them, not for his own benefit but rather to guide others toward where he is now, wanting to offer this knowledge to those who are now where he started his journey. Personally, he could forget all these words, works of language, fruits of the world, because they are useless

to him now, but he may simply want to repay the benevolence of those who offered their own knowledge so that he could find the way and embrace it.

Therefore, what is important is not the fact that one preserves or forgets the worldly knowledge that guided him toward the way, but rather whether or not he is still attached to this knowledge, and whether or not he is still wasting time in useless exploration and building up of the world. The follower of the way may let the work of the sky erase what he has learned during his initiatic journey from the world to the way, but he may also keep this knowledge in mind without actively holding on to it, so that it may be shared with others who are still lost or have yet to start their journey.

One should nonetheless be mindful of the fact that for man, language is more than one of the tools at his disposal. It is not something that he can simply release and cast away from him, not because he would necessarily have need of it or because he would not want to do so but rather because language is inherently part of himself, of what makes him human. It is because he dwells in the world that he can find meaning on the earth and in the sky, but this meaning is always revealed within the boundaries of the world itself. This world encompasses language in a very large sense: all the signs that bear meaning, which not only include written or spoken words but also gestures, facial expressions, or shapes that possess a particular meaning for man. Meaning can be found in nature, on the earth and in the sky. One can see the dawn as a manifestation of hope in the future, or associate a serpent with fear and danger, but even though the signifier is part of the earth or the sky, the meaning that man attributes to it is only found within his world. Meaning therefore cannot be dissociated from the world, and man's world can hardly be separated from language. Meaning and language are both as intertwined with each other as with man's own nature. This is why it would be difficult to obey the suggestion of the Indian sage: to abandon language or to forget it would also imply a forgetfulness of the meaning that they carry. What is here meant is nonetheless clear: man should not continue to focus on worldly knowledge once he has seen and begun to follow the way of the sky.

To release the things of the world does not imply an aban-

donment of language. On the contrary, it represents a discovery of its nature, a transformation of one's relationship with it, and its sublimation. Only when the chains binding possessor and possessed, master and slave, have been crushed and discarded can a healthy, friendly, and fruitful relationship between the two begin. This transformation can only occur through a practice. It will not come as a result of mere intellectual, worldly musings. In order to begin such a practice, the *Platform Sutra* (六祖壇經), written by the sixth patriarch of Chan, tells us that:

無念念即正，有念念成邪。

“The right way to think is to do it
as if you were not thinking.
To think as if you are thinking
becomes an evil thing.”²⁶

The translation of this sentence is rather tricky, as even in its original language, the statement it contains appears to defy logic, at least when it is read and interpreted literally. The term translated as “thinking” (念²⁷) designates the mental activity that is linked with language, in particular. To speak of “thinking without thinking” (無念念²⁸), as part of this quote can be translated literally, is not a mere display of wit, a way to appear intelligent by uttering cryptic statements that the uninitiated would not be able to understand. The Chan patriarch is only showing us one of the dangers of the world so that we can learn to avoid it, using perplexing words simply because words fail to encompass the fullness of what needs to be shown. This is in itself a lesson, a demonstration of the need not to focus on worldly knowledge but rather to use the world as a launching pad that will allow us to embrace the way, through a new experience of the earth and the sky.

To “think without thinking” means that one should be careful not to fall into the pitfalls that are found all around man's world,

²⁶ Original Chinese text from: 吳平. 《新譯六祖壇經》. 三民書局股份有限公司, 2006. TBA.

²⁷ 【niàn】; In modern Chinese, the word more usually designates “reading” and “studying.”

²⁸ 【wú niàn niàn】.

ready to engulf him and never let him go. Thinking should not be an end in itself, but rather only a tool for enlightenment, the bathing in the light of the way of the sky. The follower should look at the earth and the sky through the lens of the things of the world, but he should not pay too much attention to the lens itself. Simply knowing that it exists and that the vision it offers represents a distorted, imperfect image of the truth of nature is sufficient. This applies to every form of worldly expression: verbal thinking but also speaking, reading, or writing. Meta-linguistic thinking, that is, language that speaks about language, the world speaking about the world itself, should be kept to a minimum, because it not only does not contribute to bringing man closer to the way but may very well lead him away from it. To get lost in the maze formed by the things of the world is the best way to lose sight of the reality of the earth and the sky. Spending his days thinking about thinking, examining the world, allows him to escape the harsh and uncontrollable reality of his experience of the earth and the sky, but it only represents a form of procrastination, a delaying of the moment when he will have to be confronted to his destiny: to find the way of the sky and see its brightness.

Thoughtless thinking may therefore be easier for someone who has never really cared for the things of the world, perhaps someone whose limited talents for the handling of these things caused him to flee them to take refuge in simpler, plainer things, like the things of the earth. A man of the world, someone who has been given or has developed certain intellectual abilities allowing him to master the things belonging to this realm, will be less inclined to practice thoughtless thinking naturally. His abilities will push him to examine the world itself and to care for it more than for the earth and the sky, realms in which he is largely powerless, contrary to the world. This examination of the world may nonetheless lead him to the right path, and it may help him to perceive the benefit of thoughtless thinking: closeness to the way. This, however, will come at a price: the renunciation to remain a powerful builder of the world and the acceptance of a more passive, modest role, but one that is truer to nature itself: the role of a pawn of the way, someone who lets himself be carried by the flow of nature, trying to pass through time in harmony with it.

The conscience of the thoughtless thinker is light. It is not burdened with worries, yearning for knowledge, or even a desire

for truth. His thoughts are only the fins allowing him to slightly correct the trajectory of his existence through the flow of nature. They do not drive him or impose a course, but only assist. The speech of the speechless talker is like a drizzle of oil in a machinery, with words running toward silence without being held or seized. They diminish friction between things, contributing to the harmony of the flow, but they are not central parts of the machine.

According to the words of the patriarch, thoughtless thinking is right, while thoughtful thinking becomes an evil thing. Even though the master's mind is not focused on the words themselves, he is here nevertheless very precise in his use of language. It *becomes* an evil thing, showing that it is not inherently so. The danger is not thoughtful thinking in itself, but the neglect of the earth and the sky that it leads to. The simple-minded is not tempted by the mirages of the world, because he is not at ease in a world that he does not master. The opposition between right and evil that is presented by the patriarch therefore does not represent a condemnation of thoughtful thinking by itself and of the men practicing it. It only represents an assurance: the fact that thoughtless thinking is the surest path leading to the way, the one that presents the least dangers, even though a thoughtful thinker may nonetheless find himself immune to them. The man who has never cared for the things of the world may not need to release them in order to find the way.

As with every teaching concerning the way, one should nonetheless not take these quotes as a Gospel. The words that they use are themselves parts of the world, and therefore only offer an imperfect, distorted vision of the way. The opposition between right and evil, in particular, should not be seen as more than an imprecise compass pointing out the general direction that the follower is supposed to take. It does not represent an objective division of the creation, and this representation should therefore not be taken too seriously.

This question of the judgment operated by the world over the creation can be related to another important and delicate one: the place of emotions in man's world, and in his journey toward the way. Emotions indeed represent a crucial part of the world, which are deeply rooted in the core of man's being, as well as in the earth and the sky, the realms of the senses. Emotions are very

earthly, things that are tied to man's bodily experience, but they also have been made into things of the world, and man interprets these emotions through the lens of its entirety. Animals experience joy and sorrow, happiness and anger, but these experiences are raw, unmediated, while for man these same experiences are deeply intertwined with the rest of his world. Emotions and intellect are weaved one into the other like brocade, and it would therefore be difficult for him to feel the earth without being influenced by the effect of the world. Zhuangzi nonetheless tells us that:

悲樂者，德之邪；

喜怒者，道之過。

“For a man, to be a prey to sorrow and joy
is to deviate from virtue;
To be a prey to happiness and anger
is to violate the way.”²⁹

The four emotions mentioned by the philosopher are presented as a hindrance for the following of the way. They represent a wide spectrum of feelings, all of which are intimately known and experienced by every single man living on the earth, but they are all equally condemned. Virtue is the quality of the follower of the way: it represents his adequation with it, and therefore deviations from virtue are all violations of the way. But why would something as natural, as human, and as universal as these emotions represent transgressions of the way?

To follow the way is to imitate its nature, which is characterized by an implacable placidity. It is entirely devoid of emotions. Its course is not influenced by feelings, by desire, or even by a will. It merely guides the flow of nature, leading it to take the path of least resistance, to the lowest point of the valleys of the sky. Should man therefore simply imitate those whose capacity to

²⁹ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 248. English translation based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 249, but modified to better fit the present work; The character translated as “deviation” (邪【xié】) is the same as the one translated as “evil” in the previous quote, but it is here seen as an alternative character for 斜 (【xié】), meaning “tilted; inclined,” an attested usage. This interpretation will be followed here, as it well fits the parallel with the character for “transgression” (過【guò】).

悲樂者德之邪
喜怒者道之過

feel emotions has been impaired or removed? Would a lobotomy bring one closer to the way? The answer naturally is not that simplistic. The problem is not the emotions themselves but rather the relationship that man may develop with them. Emotions are responses that betray a state of mind, an echo within man's own being that ripples through both the earth and the world. On an earthly level, they cause his facial muscles to contract according to different patterns, or may make his body sweat, cause his face to blush, or his eyes to cry. On a worldly one, they can stimulate his desire to create and lead him to conquer the highest summits or, on the contrary, plunge him into the deepest despair and invite him to apathy. As things that are present in both the earth and the world, man can adopt different attitudes toward these emotions. In particular, he can let them direct the course of his life or he can deny them the right to influence his actions. Between these two extremes, he may also choose a middle way: to release these emotions, letting them *be* and remain part of himself, but without letting them take hold of him.

Emotions are very personal. They are closely linked with one's ego, and those who let themselves be overly influenced by their emotions are those whose ego represents the center of their life. The release of emotions is therefore tied to the release of the ego. One way by which a man may free himself from the yoke of his emotions is by enlarging the horizon of his consciousness, that is, by focusing his attention on the grandest of things, the totality of the earth, the world, and the sky, rather than the things associated with his personal experiences, his own little world. His eyes fixed on the distant horizon, on the highest mountains, on the oceans, or on the milky way, the insignificance of his ego becomes perfectly clear. Mindful of this, the elation and despair, the mirth and rage that he feels during his days and his nights on earth lose their power. He can see the causes of these emotions for what they represent in the grand scheme of things, that is, a few grains of sand on a beach that reaches as far as man can see, or the light of a firefly standing in front of the sun. If he succeeds in keeping this fact in mind, he may then develop a new relationship with his emotions: seeing them mainly as signals betraying his present state of mind or as a direction that his own nature pushes him to follow, without necessarily letting himself be guided by them. Once his emotions have been released, he is able to play with them:

he lets them imprint his mind and body when they will allow him to better perceive the essence of his own being and of the essence of being itself, the being of the whole, but keeps them at bay when they simply hinder his progress toward a greater harmony with the way.

Another way to practice the release of emotions would be to train oneself directly so as not to let them take hold of his mind. The development of a “pavlovian” response to undesirable emotions may appear simple but yet be efficient. When anger begins to seize his mind, the follower of the way may simply decide to isolate himself and to focus on the release of this anger. He may train his flesh to recognize physical desire or romantic love as signals that he is straying from the way, and that he should adjust the course of both his mind and his body if he wants to continue to be its follower. The response to these signals should nonetheless also be measured: these emotions are not to be denied entry into man’s flesh or into his mind, because they are natural parts of his own being and therefore their rejection would represent a striving against the way itself. He must simply learn not to let himself be enslaved by his emotions, and rather play with them. To reject them would be to admit that they still hold power over him, and therefore the emotionless man is as much dominated by emotions as the one who lets them direct the course of his life. Neither rejecting nor holding them, the follower of the way simply keeps them close, learning from them when it benefits his journey on the way, but ignoring their plea for control over man’s world.

Perhaps more than the emotions themselves, it is the things of the world that are tied to them that may be detrimental to man’s relationship with the way. Emotions are things of the worlds, but they are not isolated, like a stone block laid in the middle of an empty field. They are fully part of the world, which is a large construction, an edifice composed of a myriad of building blocks intricately assembled to form a whole. Each thing of the world is attached to countless others, like bricks whose weight is distributed over those below it and that carry others located on top of them. Emotions are inserted into the general structure of the world, and when they are felt a multitude of things associated with them come to man’s mind. These emotions are tied to other parts of the world, like a fish caught in a large net. If one attempts to pull out the fish without first releasing it from the grip of the mesh,

the whole net will be pulled with it. The weight of the net is far heavier than the fish itself, just like emotions themselves hold far less power over man if they are isolated from the rest of the world. For example, a feeling of anger caused by a trivial frustration in man's daily life may by itself only be momentary, superficial, and easily extinguished, but this anger may bring out the memory of other experiences that were sources of rage in the past. The entirety of the net of unpleasant memories or frustrations caused by what he perceives to be wrong in the world or on the earth may come to the surface as a result of this small emotion. What has been associated with the feeling of anger during all his life may emerge from the depths of his mind, amplifying this emotion and rendering it uncontrollable. A remedy to this would be to attempt to disconnect this network of worldly associations that links these emotions to the rest of the world, by focusing on their earthly nature: to do one's best to confine emotions to the flesh, to the earth, and not let them invade his world. This means to see emotions as earthly manifestations rather than meaningful parts of the world, things that should be analyzed, interpreted, or studied. These emotions will then be felt, embraced, and then digested, letting them go as swiftly as they arrived; letting their voices be heard, but not letting their imprint on the world and the mind be too deep.

Emotions are only one category of things of the world. Others need to be released as well, and one of them is sensations. The *Blue Cliff Record* gives us a dialogue concerning such a release:

僧問洞山：寒暑到來如何回避？
 山雲：何不向無寒暑處去？
 僧雲：如何是無寒暑處？
 山雲：寒時寒殺閻黎，熱時熱殺閻黎。
 A monk asked Tung Shan,
 “When cold and heat come,
 how can we avoid them?” Shan said,
 “Why don’t you go to the place
 where there is no cold or heat?”
 The monk said, “What is the place where
 there is no cold or heat?”
 Tung Shan said,
 “When it’s cold, the cold kills you;
 when it’s hot, the heat kills you.”³⁰

Protection from exposure to the heat of the summer sun or the cold winds of the winter is among man’s most essential needs, and it is therefore very natural for him to be concerned with this question. Temperature is an objective phenomenon that can be quantified, corresponding to a level of energy stored within parts of the earth, within matter, but heat and cold are also subjective sensations, things of the world. Signals come from man’s flesh, evaluating this earthly phenomenon and transmitting this evaluation to his mind and his world, and then man can react accordingly, deciding whether or not he needs to cover himself, to seek shelter, or to bathe himself in water.

The subject of this dialogue therefore is not the earthly phenomenon linked with temperatures, but rather the disciple’s relationship with heat and cold as things of the world. Before looking at the content of this dialogue, the nature of such sensations should be briefly examined, and in particular, what distinguishes them from the subject of the previous quote: emotions. Emotions arise within the world, but their effect reaches the earth and is displayed on man’s flesh. Sensations, such as heat or cold, on the other hand, arise from the earth and are propagated throughout

³⁰ Original Chinese from: 吳平。《新澤碧巖集 (上)》。台北：三民書局股份有限公司，2005：478–479。；English translation from: *The Blue Cliff Record*. Shambhala Publications, 2005: 258. Print.

man's world. This difference plays an important part in the way these sensations can be released.

Because they arise from the earth, sensations cannot be extinguished before they reach the world. As things first belonging to the world, emotions can be tamed before their effects can reach the earth: a deep sadness may be controlled by man's will before tears will fill his eyes and run down his cheeks. Sensations, on the other hand, arise out of the earth, where he exerts a very limited power over things. He has limited control over the temperature of the air and the things around him, and once heat or cold has reached his senses, they are conveyed through his flesh and into his world, where they are processed as things of the world, inserted in the same kind of structure as the one mentioned concerning emotions, a network of associations that links this sensation, as a thing of the world, to countless other things belonging to this realm. The fact that sensations arise from the earth may nonetheless present some advantages to the disciple who wishes to free himself from them.

The invitation of the master to go "where there is no cold or heat" may at first glance be mistaken as an invitation to cut oneself off from the earth as a way to avoid what is perceived as unpleasant sensory experiences. Taking refuge in the spiritual world, the disciple would then be free of the torments of the reality of the earth. This would nonetheless be to misunderstand the nature of sensations and the words of the master. To go "where there is no cold or heat" would be to flee the world to take refuge on the earth, because while the earth is the source of the phenomena linked with cold or heat, they only exist as such within man's world. To take refuge in the earth means to do one's best not to let the physical sensation associated with the temperature of the things of the earth reach and affect the world. Isolating the imprint of temperature upon his senses; disconnecting the earth from the world, the disciple may be able to cease from being unnerved by the parching heat of the sun or the numbing cold of the winter snow. Refusing to let himself be controlled by his world, whose things are like lianas taking hold of his mind, he lives on the bare earth, preferring sensation to cognition, physical contact rather than metaphysical constructions.

To dwell in a place where there is no cold or heat is to inhabit

a place where there are no things whatsoever. Man may see the earth as an assembly of a myriad of things, but these things are all products of his world, and they cannot exist outside of it. By itself, the earth is only an indistinguishable part of the whole of the creation. It contains no rivers nor stones, no mountains nor valleys, only a totality, perfectly continuous, without borders separating different things. It knows no light nor darkness, no heat or cold, even though the phenomena from which man builds up these concepts in his world are objectively present in it. They simply cannot be thought of as particular things outside of the world.

In order to escape from the grip of the things of the world, man may therefore try to leave the world behind so that he may enjoy freedom from things, among which are heat and cold. As said earlier, such an abandonment of the world cannot be complete and permanent, because this world is also what makes him human and what allows him to make sense of his experiences of the earth and the sky. A practice may nonetheless allow him to lessen the grip of sensations upon his mind and their effect on his world. Focusing his attention on the whole of the earth, he may develop an ability to silence the anguish, the fear, and the disturbance caused by fire or ice. He may reduce the size of his world, demolishing the parts of it deemed unnecessary or harmful to his embracing of the way, and only dwell in its core, the parts of it that he cannot do away with without losing track of the way and seeing his own being fade away. Such a modest worldly habitation reduces his dependence on and his attachment to the things of the world. Their release is simpler, and it is easier for him to free himself to take refuge in the oneness of the earth and the sky.

To live upon the bare earth, in the realm of the senses rather than the one of cognition, may nonetheless not necessarily be considered easy in itself. If man is naturally enclined to dwell in the world, it is because this world plays an important part in his capacity to survive and to reproduce. Without his mind processing what his senses tell him, he would quickly find himself in danger. This can be observed in people suffering from “congenital insensitivity to pain,” whose inability to process pain signals coming from their senses makes them vulnerable to serious injuries. Without pain, one may put his hand in boiling water without noticing, keeping it submerged until irreparable damage is done to it, just as he may let snow or ice freeze his limbs without feeling the danger it rep-

resents before it is too late. The world transforms the sensations that we experience on the earth into a language that speaks to us and teaches us how to survive. This language was not created by man's mind, but rather arose naturally following millions of years of evolution and natural selection. It points out the dangers that threaten to destroy his body, such as extreme heat or cold, using pain and reflexes as ways to avoid these dangers. To voluntarily become deaf to these alarm calls implies that one takes upon himself the possibility of seeing his own flesh and his own being vanishing from the face of the earth.

The meaning of the last sentence of the Chan master can now be unfolded. It may appear to be purposefully cryptic, meant to puzzle the disciple who is too eager to look for an answer inside the world rather than to simply let the earth teach him, but it nonetheless does not miss the mark. To tell him that: "When it's cold, the cold kills you; when it's hot, the heat kills you" accurately describes the predicament in which the man who stands in the place where there is no cold or heat finds himself. Deaf to the language of the senses, blind to the things of the world, he stands naked, unarmed on the bare earth, without any ally to warn him of any dangers and unable to see the effect that the different elements of the earth and the sky may exert upon his body. Placidly standing upon the earth, under the sky, he will not be unnerved by the snowstorm that engulfed him. He will not be frightened by the army of sun rays that assault his skin, piercing it and making his blood boil. Without feeling cold or heat, his body will be carried by the flow of nature without him opposing any resistance. When the cold comes, he will stand, the entirety of his flesh frozen until the spring, when the thawing of the snow will mark the beginning of the putrefaction of his flesh and his return to the ground. When the heat comes, he will stand against the brightness of our star until his skin grows red and dry, until his lips are cracked as the moisture of his body flees unto the sky, and he falls down unconscious before his desiccated corpse is reduced to dust by the winds.

The place without cold or heat therefore is a place where death may come at all times to carry man away from being. It stands in contrast with the world, a realm first built to assist man so that he may flee away from death as much as his strength would allow it. The one deciding to keep the world at bay to embrace the earth

may nonetheless consciously embrace his fate. He may be ready and willing to pay the price of his freedom from the things of the world such as cold or heat. Having released the things of the world, he may want to release his own self, his own being, and therefore not be disturbed by the idea of his last breath and the return of his body to the ground from which it came. Letting himself be engulfed by the flow of nature, he may cease to care where it leads him, as he is simply content with the harmony he enjoys with it. Few will nonetheless agree to let the flow of nature decide their fate and their survival. The place where there is no cold or heat is not a crowded one.

There is nonetheless more than one path of liberation from the things of the world, and every follower of the way must find the one upon which he will be able to progress. The great master Linji certainly is one of the best guides for this journey, someone who uses the world to deconstruct the world, but also uses his shout to shatter its foundations:

問、師唱誰家曲、宗風嗣阿誰。

師云、我在黃蘗處、三度發問、
三度被打。

僧擬議、師便喝。

隨後打云、不可向虛空裏釘橛去也。

A monk asked: “Master, of what house is the tune you sing?
To whose style of Chan do you succeed?”

The master said:

“When I was staying with Huangbo I questioned him
three times and was hit three times.”

The monk hesitated.

The master gave a shout and then struck him, saying:

“You cannot drive a nail or a stake into the empty space.”³¹

This short dialogue represents a lesson on how to release the things of the world. It begins with a question of the disciple, whose content shows that he finds himself caught in the mire of

³¹ Original Chinese text from: 入矢, 《臨濟錄》, p. 16. English translation based on the one from: Linji-yixuan, *The Record of Linji*, pp. 3–4, but modified to better fit the present work.

attachment to things of the world, desperately searching for the way within man-made creations. The master naturally does not answer this question, which would only cause him to stray further. He instead decides to tell him about the manner in which his own master responded to similar inquiries: a beating. Far from being a curiosity, such a display of controlled violence constitutes an important part of the Chan tradition. Chan masters are indeed often seen holding a soft wooden or bamboo stick that is used on younger disciples, but its use is not a mere punishment for undisciplined students.

The beating is not meant to harm or even to cause pain. It foremost is a wake-up call, an attempt to shake a disciple so that he may escape the pit in which he has fallen and that keeps him prisoner. In this precise case, this prison is the world itself. The beating is an appeal to the disciple's senses, showing him that he is not only a thinking mind, a dweller and explorer of the world, but also a creature made of flesh and blood, part of the earth. This represents an answer to the only question that the disciple should have asked: how to follow the way? This answer is delivered on the earth rather than in the world, using a stick rather than words. He will not find the way by asking questions or by thinking, but only through a practice, which must be rooted in his bodily experience of the earth and the sky. There is no answer to be found. He only has to release all things, belonging to each one of the three realms, earth, world, and sky, and then will the way appear, as clear to him as a cloudless sky at noon. This mention of the violent but subtle teaching of Huangbo is nonetheless not understood by the disciple.

The cluelessness of the disciple is immediately displayed on his face, as the account of the master only puzzles him and causes him to plunge deeper into the worldly mire to find the meaning of this beating. Having failed to teach his disciple with words, attempting to take him out of the world using the world itself, Linji then applies the teaching he received from his own master, appealing not only to one of the disciple's senses, but two: first with a beating, stimulating his sense of touch, and then with a shout, doing the same with his hearing. Both actions briefly interrupt the course of the young monk's thoughts. His attention is forcibly brought back to the earth and away from the pointless exploration of the world. The master, who prefers to inhabit the earth rather than the world,

stepped back into the world to communicate with his student, and then invites him to step on the earth, the place where there is no difference between sects, no doctrines, and no precepts. The efficiency of these wake-up calls is nonetheless very momentary. The student will be tempted to immediately return to what he considers his home: his world, the place where he can find or attribute meaning to all things, no matter whether they belong to the earth or to the world itself. If he has failed to perceive the nature of the beating and the shout, he will be enclined to search for their meaning in the world, thereby missing the mark.

The master is nonetheless patient and thorough: he completes the appeal to the senses with one to the mind, once more using the weapons of the world in order to undermine its grip on the naive student. He offers a metaphor that is meant to show him the way out of the mire in which he is caught: "You cannot drive a nail or a stake into empty space." The nail is the question, which is a thing of the world that must be inserted into a space, the world in order for it to be answered. The nail is rigid, solid, reflecting the state of mind of the one who forged it. His world is full of certainty. It only accepts things that have clear boundaries in its midst, things that are considered to be objective representations. The empty space is the world of the master, the world of someone who has released all things and taken refuge on the earth, under the sky. To ask him a question is pointless: it is as if someone entered an empty store and asked for things to be given to him. No matter how insistent or how rich he is, he will go out empty-handed. The disciple is called to throw out his nail and to join him on the earth, letting others care for the things of the world or letting this world crumble under its own weight.

One way to release the things of the world may therefore simply be to stop all questioning, with man stimulating his senses in order to wake himself up from the sleep induced by a prolonged lingering inside of the world. Catching himself as he ventures into the deeper parts of the world, he may hit himself, shout, or run, to remind himself of his own earthly nature and bring back his attention to the earth and the sky as a whole. Fully experiencing the earth and the sky, through his flesh and his senses, he will not lose himself in pointless thinking, in the building up or exploration of the world, and once he will have taken distance from the dazzling light of the world(s), the subtle glow of the way of the sky will

begin to shine into his eyes, and he will find harmony with it.

Bodhidharma tells us what awaits man then:

迷時有世間可出，
悟時無世間可出。

“When we’re deluded, there’s a world to escape.
When we get enlightened, there’s nothing to escape.”³²

Those upon whom the light of the way of the sky shines are those who dwell in an almost empty world, those who have let go of all the things belonging to each realm of the creation. The man of the world may yearn to see and to follow the way, and strive to free himself by attempting to escape the world as a whole. The follower of the way nonetheless knows that the world cannot be escaped if one is still attached to things. Only by deconstructing this world can he achieve liberation. Then, his chains will simply cease to exist rather than be broken. The world will become a desert, while the enlightened ones bathe in the light of the sky, outside of what they considered to be their home.

To find the light nonetheless does not necessarily imply that one will remain in it. Zhuangzi warns us concerning one of the dangers that may befall the follower of the way:

³² Original Chinese text and English translation from: 蔡志忠, 《蔡志忠漫画中国传统文化经典: 达摩禅 (中英文对照版)》, p. 109 (達摩悟性論).

庄子曰：

知道易，勿言難。

知而不言，所以之天也。

知而言之，所以之人也。

古之人，天而不人。

Zhuangzi said, "It is not hard to understand the way, but it is hard not to talk about it.

Knowing the way without talking about it is to follow the sky;

Knowing the way and talking about it is to follow man.

The ancient people conformed themselves to the sky rather than to man."³³

The world more often than not stands against the way of the sky. The two are enemies in the battle for man's heart and mind. To pretend that the way can be seen and followed from within the confines of the world, such as by trying to explain it using language, is not only to be mistaken but also to mislead those who will hear these words. And yet, those who are well-known for their following of the way, such as Laozi or Zhuangzi himself, have talked and written about the way. The contradiction is only apparent. They used language not to describe or to explain the way of the sky, but rather only to point out its direction and to highlight the predicament in which most men find themselves, as blind prisoners of the world, who are as unaware of the presence of their chains as they are of the nature of the way. They warn of the dangers that those looking for the way will have to face, offering a helping hand to younger generations, but do not pretend that they have understood the way, as to understand is to possess, and thereby to stray away.

The man who has released the things of the world is not someone who has no contact with these things. They remain nearby, even when they have no grip on him, nor him on them. He must learn to handle these things without letting himself be enslaved

³³ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 568. English translation based on the one found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 569, but modified to better fit the present work.

again by them, learn to play with them rather than to control or be controlled by them.

2.5 Playing with the Things of the World

The fact that a man releases the things of the world to which he was attached does not mark the end of his relationship with these things. His world does not simply disappear following this event, nor does man cease to be one of its inhabitants. He may take refuge in the earth as much as he can, but he cannot sever his connection to the world entirely, as his own being is deeply intertwined with the nature of this world. He also needs many of the things of the world in order to perform the daily tasks tied to his most basic needs, most of which occur on the earth but are mediated by the world. For example, to feed himself, he must know and recognize edible parts of the earth, and therefore consult and use the knowledge of the world, and also look at the earth through the lens that it represents.

The relationship between man and the things of the world is nonetheless profoundly affected by the mutual release: the liberation of man from the chains of things, and the things' liberation from the grip of man. Instead of mutual enslavement, this relationship must become a friendship, a game of seduction and separation. Such a game, a play, has already been described concerning the things of the earth, and the different nature of the two realms does not fundamentally change the nature of the play. It is like a dance, where two partners interact with one another without coercion, without control, but rather pay attention to the other and react according to his movements, softly adapting one's own course. It significantly differs from the grasping and holding that predominates in the relationship between men who, consciously or unknowingly, oppose the way, as a pillar of marble differs from a waterfall, or like a free man differs from a slave. There are nonetheless a few specificities that distinguish the play with the things of the world from the one with those of the earth.

When he has released the things of the world, the follower of the way ceases to be a builder or an explorer of this world. He sees it for what it is: an imperfect means to make sense of the earth and the sky rather than an end in itself. He has clearly seen the fact that the edification of the world is mainly done to feed man's ego, whereas it could serve what would seem to be a more noble purpose, one more in accordance with the way: to provide a space

where man can retreat away from earth and sky, estranging him from them both so that he may watch them from afar, without the entirety of his self standing in their midst, and therefore be able to see their nature. The mere exploration of this realm is also too often fruitless and dangerous: many people searching for the way or the other things of the sky within the confines of the world have lost themselves in it, vainly searching for the essence of nature among artificial, man-made things. A man who lives in accordance with the way does not participate in the race for the top of the world. He does not build what he does not need to embrace the way. He has no personal ambition and satisfies himself with the places of the world that are considered low and are neglected or despised by those competing for the summit.

Standing in opposition to the builders, the explorers, and the climbers of the world, those who are in harmony with the way embrace the role of players of the world. They do not grasp the things of the world, but rather only gently enter in contact with them. They do not force encounters with these things, but rather let them come or let them be brought by others. This is why the player is mostly silent, having no will nor use of an abundant flow of words, but he frequently accepts to break this silence when the words are thrown at him by men who have yet to free themselves from the things of the world, that is, when he is asked a question. He not only plays with the things of the world, such as words themselves, but also with the men of the world, those who are still bound in chains to it, as the playful interactions may lead them to realize their own condition and invite them to embrace the way. The player is nonetheless always taking a risk by indulging in such activities, as he may not always remain in control of himself as he plays, and the things or the men of the world may pull him back to the mire of worldly attachments. He may use words to show the way out to his disciple but may himself be caught in the traps of the world, such as judgments lacking ground and false statements based on prejudice or delusion. The player must therefore always be watchful of himself, so that he can bring others out of the world and onto the earth, without letting himself be imprisoned in groundless parts of the world.

When the player plays with the things of the earth, it is mostly because he needs to interact with them in his daily life. He drinks beverages to quench his thirst, eat food to satisfy his hunger, and

wear clothes to protect his flesh from the assault of the elements. When he plays with the things of the world, with the men of the world, and with the world as a whole, it is not only out of necessity but also to confront them. The playful nature of this activity does not preclude moves that may be considered hostile by the world. Indeed, whereas the player is a son of the earth, owing respect to the realm of which he is part and to which he owes his own being, he does not see himself as a son of the world, not because he would be able to do away with it, he cannot, but rather because the world has been transformed into something radically different from what it was at the beginning. It does not serve man, guiding him toward the way and showing him the earth and the sky by allowing him to partially stand outside of them, but rather represents a pit preventing him from accomplishing his destiny. Playing with the things of the world may therefore also represent an opportunity to expose its weaknesses, making them be seen by those who are still prisoners of these things, so that they may gain awareness of the absurdity of their condition. Playing with these things, he may also deconstruct the architecture of the world, showing that the hierarchies and valuation of these things may be rooted in falsehood or simply lack ground. The player may thus also become a destroyer of large sections of the world, not because he would actively wish it or strive for it, but simply because the exposure of the weakness of their foundations would be enough to trigger their crumbling down.

Furthermore, the state of mind of the player also directly affects the nature of the things of the world with which he plays. These things reflect the attitude of the player: their definition, their boundaries, are indeed not only determined by those who have created them, but also by those using them. If the man handling them does so with a firm hand, these things will have more rigid boundaries, a more definite shape. The player, on the other hand, will not firmly grasp them, but only gently enter in contact with them, and they will therefore have a blurrier contour, a less precisely cut shape. For example, a man of the world, someone who is convinced of the infallibility and the objectivity of its representations, will tend to see words as having a clear-cut, precise meaning: the words “god” or “soul” to him represent determined things, an objective reality that is conform to the idea that he possesses of them. The player, on the other hand, may use these words but

refuse to see them as things that he *knows* or *understands*, letting these words be signs pointing out toward something that he recognizes as unknown and unfathomable, things whose image cannot be accurately depicted within his world.

When the follower of the way has released the things of the world, the boundaries separating his own self from all things also begin to fade away. The dissolution of both the self and the things allows the playing of the player to take the form of a merger as much as a dance. The two dancing bodies are like clouds encountering one another, letting the other pass through himself; letting himself be transformed by the other, and letting the imprint of himself be left upon it. The world of the player is not a tower made of rigid blocks assembled according to a definite structure. It rather is a blurry patchwork of things that are left largely undetermined, letting their contours continuously change and evolve according to the use that man makes of them. Such an attitude, and such a world reflecting it, not only allow the player to liberate himself from the yoke of the things of the world, but also offer him a greater freedom to express himself within the world and to affect it more deeply when it is useful for his discovery and embracing of the way.

The *Blue Cliff Record* tells us about the power that the player can exert upon the world:

點鐵成金，點金成鐵，
忽擒忽縱，是衲僧拄杖子。
“To touch iron and turn it into gold,
To touch gold and turn it into iron,
To suddenly capture and suddenly release
—this is the staff of patchrobed monks.”³⁴

Many among those who claimed to follow the way have interpreted sentences such as these too literally, failing to see that what is spoken about concerns the world rather than the earth. The power exerted by the follower of the way does not turn him

³⁴ Original Chinese text from: 吳平, 《新譯碧巖集(上)》, p. 877. English translation from: Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 466 (85th case in the English translation; 88th case in the aforementioned Chinese edition).

into an alchemist. His staff is not like the staff of the Druids of ancient Celtic legends, able to change the shape and nature of the things of the earth, nor the wand of a magician. The power of the player is displayed in the world, and it comes from the fact that he is fully conscious of the difference between the earth and its representation as things within man's world.

There are objective physical differences between iron and gold, and the follower of the way will not be able to erase or to act upon these differences. In the eyes of men, the main difference between the two metals is nonetheless not their physicochemical properties, but rather their value. The sun-colored metal occupies a far higher position within man's world, mainly because of its rarity and beauty, which is not tarnished by the work of the sky. Iron, as the most common metal of our planet, which is very useful but also quickly taken back to the earth by corrosion, does not enjoy such prestige. It has been omnipresent in man's life since its discovery thousands of years ago, but it only occupies a rather low position in the hierarchy of the world. The player nonetheless knows that the difference in value, their place in the world, is in the eye of the beholder. Because he is conscious of the nature of these things, he has the power to change these hierarchies, for his own world at least.

The player can play with the things of the world. He can treat iron as if it were gold, elevating it above all other metals in his world, and touching it as if it were the most precious part of the earth. He may also show disdain for gilded objects that men would kill to obtain and throw them in the sea, offering them back to the earth, an action that is bound to stupefy the men of the world, who would certainly consider this a proof of insanity. Conforming himself to nature and to the way, he does not abide by the rules of the world. Iron forms the core of the earth, and it is also its most abundant element. Its heaviness is what allows man to stand erect upon the face of the earth, without floating in the sky. The gravitational pull of the iron core of the earth not only keeps him close to the surface of the earth, it also prevents the oxygen coating its face from drifting away and be scattered across space, something that would cause the death of his kind in a matter of minutes. Seeing the big picture, the horizon of the earth and the sky, he does not fear to go against the short-sightedness of the world of men who have yet to see beyond the horizon of their ego.

The behavior of the player mainly affects his own world, but it may also have an impact on the world of larger groups of men, or even reshape the parts of it that are dwelt by the whole of mankind. The witnessing of the apparent inversion of the place of iron and gold; the observation of the player neglecting or despising the yellow metal while he honors chunks of rusty iron may ripple throughout their world, showing to all men that another hierarchy, and another world, are not only possible but also within the reach of their hands. The player may thus become a lightbringer, a sun highlighting the impermanence and arbitrary nature of many parts of the world, structures that he thought were objective representations of the earth and the sky but are now found to be man-made, things that could be transformed according to his will.

The player nonetheless does not busy himself with the task of the rectification or improvement of the world, and this for a simple reason: his goal is not to be found within its frontiers. If he plays with the world, it is either to liberate himself from its grip by undermining its foundations, or to show the path to others, so that they may free themselves from the world and embrace the way. He captures things momentarily, as a red-hot piece of metal, handling it as quickly as he can before releasing it. An example of such behavior may be a master replying to a question of a disciple, a question that would betray his enslavement to the hierarchies of the world. To agree to reply is to appear to play by the rules of the world, using some of its concepts that are either rooted in falsehood or that simply lack ground, but then to swiftly make the absurdity of these things of the world manifest, thereby undermining the structure of this world. He does not need to play with these things, but by playing with them, he not only protects himself, filling the pits in which he could fall again, but also helps others find the way.

The power of the player is his staff, which supports him during his walk on the path and can also be used to strike the world at its weakest points, making the baseless parts of it fall down to the ground, leaving only its core standing, the parts that man really needs in order to live and embrace the way. The playing field of the player is nonetheless not restricted to the hierarchies of the world, its architecture. It covers the entirety of the world, and the use of language, in particular, represents an important set of things with which the follower of the way is called to play. The *Compendium*

of *Five Lamps* (五燈會元), a text of the Chinese Chan tradition, tells us, concerning the enlightened:

有語中無語，
無語中有語。
“He does not say anything by saying something;
He says something by saying nothing.”³⁵

To play with language, man must first be mindful of its nature and, in particular, of the fact that language is cleaved in two, like the two sides of a coin: one side represents *signifiers*, that is, the sounds, the characters or ideograms, or the gestures that serve as the supports of language, pointing out to a particular meaning established by convention. The other side is what is meant or understood when one perceives a signifier with his senses: the *signified*. The relationship between the two is nonetheless often complex, refusing to let itself be grasped by the mind of the men of the world, those who want to “under-stand” all things and submit them to their mind. The quote from the *Compendium of Five Lamps* does not represent such an attempt, but rather only shows us that we should refrain from thinking that the relationship between signifier and signified is always direct and clear.

The world can be used to topple the world, and language can be used to show the meaninglessness of language. It would seem that language by definition would be the expression of meaning through the use of signs, but one may nonetheless subvert this definition and expectation. The player may indeed use the signifiers belonging to a particular language, but break the conventions tied to their use to such an extent that the meaning of what he would say would be completely blurred. Uttering gibberish or simply out of place sentences, or scribbling incoherent or cryptic series of words, the player may shock or puzzle his audience, which would try to make sense of what he says. Playing as much with language as with his audience, his speech may nonetheless be meaningful: it may point out the meaninglessness of words that are not used in accordance with the rules of the world, thereby expressing a meaning but one that would not be found in the words themselves. It

³⁵ Original Chinese text from: 普濟, 《五燈會元》, np. (Ch. 70). TBA.

would rather be found in the very absence of a direct signified that could be linked to the signifiers he used. This “play of words” would be an expression of “nothingness” within language, pointing out to an absence of meaning, a semiotic void.

Emptying the words of their meaning, using signifiers while discarding their signified, the man of the way offers empty shells to his brethren to play with. An example of this may be seen in what is called “Yunmen’s one-word barrier” (雲門一字關), named after the Chinese Chan master Yunmen Wenyan (雲門文偃). The following dialogue offers a simple demonstration:

「如何是禪？」「是。」
 「如何是道？」「得。」
 “What is Chan?” — “It is.”
 “What is the way?” — “Gain.”³⁶

The effects of this “method” are manifold. Searching for meaning without finding it, the disciples may thereby be brought to the limits of their world, the point where they cannot progress anymore and are forced to abandon their search, admitting that parts of their world may be meaningless. They may then begin to question the basis of this world as a whole, and perhaps ultimately be led outside of its frontiers, where they have a chance to find the way, as they follow the trail of empty signifiers left by the man of the way.

Because of the ambiguity inherent to the classical Chinese language, linked to its conciseness, the quote can also be read differently, as it contains no verbs, and these have to be inferred when it is translated into English. It could therefore also be read as “Surrounded by speech, he does not hear anything.” This would describe another way by which one may play with the things of the world, highjacking language and using it to undermine the world in front of those who are still its prisoners. The player may hear the words of the men of the world who speak to him or near him, but he can refuse to listen to them. He does not let these words that are thrown at him penetrate his mind. They bounce on him as rubber

³⁶ Original Chinese text from: 李蕭鋹 星雲大師。 “《星雲禪話》一字關 | 星雲禪話 | 人間福報”, accessed 5/2020. TBA.

balls hitting a concrete wall. He does not let them either move his heart or affect his world. He welcomes the signifiers into his ears or his eyes but chases away the signified. Those who uttered these signifiers had laden them with a signified, but the player has decided to split the sign in two, cleaving it like a mussel, keeping its shell but discarding the flesh that was inside it. Doing this, he can protect himself from the potentially noxious influence of groundless parts of the world, not letting himself be dragged back to the prison that they represent. Insulating himself from what does not help him to live in harmony with the way, he becomes immune to the assaults of the men of the world. It may nonetheless also once again provide a valuable lesson to these men. Pointing out the fact that someone may empty the sign they used of their meaning, of their signified, it provides a display of the nature of signs and of the fact that words are not equal to what they are meant to represent: the world is not equal to the earth and the sky; the signifier is not conflated with the signified. Both can be separated and should not be confused. Man should see that his world is fleeting, an often-arbitrary series of representations that differ from the things that are represented, and see that he should re-dis-cover the earth and the sky instead of spending his life busying himself with the things of the world.

The second part of the quote tells us that “he says something by saying nothing.” Just as words can be found or rendered meaningless, meaning can also be found outside of words, and even outside of language as a whole. The man of the way may therefore stay silent, not indulging in the battles of words with which the men of the world busy themselves, but still live a meaningful life. This does not mean that he would simply use his body to communicate, as body language is as much a language as oral speech, but rather that his life itself, his behavior, may carry a meaning that may be perceived by others. He does not need to willfully lade his actions with meaning, that would also be a form of language, a use of the world: simply by living in accordance with the way, relinquishing his own will, his own life becomes a display of the nature of the way, which can be seen and interpreted as such by those around him.

The man of the way can therefore desert the world, take refuge on the earth and under the sky, and still be a source of meaning. Such a meaning can only be displayed in the world, and it is the

men of the world who can make it shine within it. Like a painting, the life of the man of the way speaks by itself to the one beholding it. Living outside of the world, he becomes earth, and speaks like the earth, like a spring meadow soaked with the brilliance of the sun and filled with the scent of flowers, whose sight brings on feelings of pleasure and calms man down. Those able to perceive the signs of the earth and the sky will also see those of the silent follower of the way, without words, without particular body language, only harmony with the flow of nature.

Nature shows, it does not tell. It fills the heart of man with emotions, but it has no will of its own. The men of the world attempt to decode its meaning, but it does not let itself be brought into the realm built by man's hands. And yet the deepest or highest forms of meaning that are found within the world are all tied to the essence of nature, to the nature of the way, although it may be called by other names: the divine, god, transcendence. What this shows is that the boundary separating the earth and the world is not as clear-cut as one may think.

Parts of the world can be meaningless: for example, the aforementioned empty shells that represent the lowest parts of the world, those that are the closest to the earth, composed on the one hand of a signifier which is between earth and world, both a soundwave or a character written on paper and a thing of the world, and on the other hand a purely worldly signified that is simply empty, nonexistent. Reciprocally, parts of the earth may be imparted with meaning: they can become a source of meaning that is embodied in the earth itself, only waiting to be displayed within the world. All the things of the earth may become part of the world, but this is different: a particular flower may become a symbol associated with other things within man's world, but this meaning entirely rests upon this world. If this world were to disappear, this symbol would vanish also. Parts of the earth may nonetheless bear a meaning that would be independent of a precise world, things that may be universally recognized as meaning something particular, regardless of one's culture or world. The life of the man of the way displays the nature of the way within the world of those whose mind is receptive enough, and it will do so no matter in what kind of world does this display occur. The same may be true of other signs of nature: the hope incarnated by the dawn, when the darkness recede, and light and warmth return to

the face of the earth; the calming nature of the waves hitting the shore, whose sound always soothed the heart of men, no matter during what time or where did they live. Nature speaks a language that can be brought into man's world, but one that does not depend on it to bear its meaning, but only to display it to man.

Once again, man is therefore encouraged to refrain from adopting clear-cut ideas, that is, to build a world that would make no place for ambiguity and uncertainty. The horizon separating the earth from the world is like the twilight separating the night from the day and the day from the night: a continuum that joins as much as it separates. The impossibility to pinpoint a clear separation nonetheless does not negate the difference between night and day, earth and world. It only tells us that our mind should never consider that it has understood nature, and that only by playing with the things of the world and the earth may we see these things, not necessarily more clearly, as clarity implies a determination of things, but rather see them as they are: blurry, indistinct, refusing to let themselves be grasped and defined. By playing with both the things of the earth and those of the world, man may then see the twilight separating and uniting the realms, how it really is rather than how the world represents it, and thereby perhaps bring back the world closer to the earth, and to the way itself. A world close to the earth, a world of players, is a world that becomes a manifestation of the way, sublimating nature rather than representing something that stands in contrast with it, something that opposes its flow. Such an endeavor would nonetheless only succeed if all men were shown the way, released all things, and became players of the world. For this to happen, many generations of masters will need to arise from the depths of the earth.

The transformation of the world can only occur one small step at a time, with teachers patiently showing disciples how to play with the things of the world. One more example may be found in the following dialogue, which shows what kind of relationship a man of the way may have with language:

昔趙州禪師問僧「一日看多少經？」

僧曰：「或七八，或十卷。」

師曰：「閤梨不會看經。」

曰：「和尚一日看多少？」

師曰：「老僧一日祇看一字。」

Zhaozhou asked a monk,

“How many sutras do you read in one day?”

The monk said, “Sometimes seven or eight. Sometimes ten.”

Zhaozhou said, “Oh, then you can’t read scriptures.”

The monk said, “Master, how many do you read in a day?”

Zhaozhou said, “In one day I read one word.”³⁷

Here, it is the master who initiates the play by asking a question, but he already knows the answer, and it is just a pretext to play with the disciple. He lays a trap, and the young student enthusiastically jumps inside it. This trap is nonetheless not meant to humiliate him, but rather to puzzle him, to shake up his world, so that he may question the effectiveness of his search for enlightenment within the scriptures, within the world.

According to the men of the world, knowledge can never be detrimental. The more one learns, the more one knows, and the greater is the understanding of the creation. The study of the scriptures would bring one closer and closer to enlightenment and to the way, and one should therefore devote as much time and effort as he can to know them. The answer of the master nonetheless contradicts such a view. He is not a man of the world, but rather a man of the way, and in this case the two stand opposite to one another. This answer can nonetheless be interpreted in different ways, unfolding different layers of meaning, like the peeling of an onion, without any core that would represent a definite truth.

A first layer may be seen as telling us that one word would be enough to ponder for a day. Man may indeed not be able to exhaust the exploration and examination of the meaning of a single word. Holding a single thing of the earth in his hand, he may spend hours contemplating its smallest details and observing

³⁷ Original Chinese text from: 月溪法師。《神會大師證道歌顯宗記溯源》。水星文化，2015。P. 135; English translation from: Andy Ferguson. *Zen's Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings*. Simon / Schuster, 2011. P. 159.

the countless links binding it to the rest of the world, the myriad of relationships between this thing and all the others. To carefully examine a particular thing of the world also represents a way to examine the essence of the things of the world and the essence of the world itself, a task that can never be completed. A lifetime may therefore be spent reflecting on a single word, rather than a single day, and one may still fail to be able to grasp its meaning.

The things of the world are indeed as slippery as a fish in an oily sea. The more man tries to get hold of them, the easier it is for them to slip away. Trying to grasp the entirety of even the smallest thing of the world may prove to be a titanic task, one that no man could accomplish. Why then would the master continue to contemplate one of these things each passing day? One answer may be that it would serve as a reminder of the futility of the building of the world and of trying to take hold of its parts. Each thing becomes a window and a mirror showing him his own failure, the limits of his mind, which cannot fathom the nature of this small, insignificant thing. Contemplating the vanity of the world daily, he is reminded that he will not find the way inside any part of the world. Only the earth and the sky can show him the way, and the world only exists to point out their nature, to show him where he must go. The master hangs on to the world by a single thread, a single word, that allows him to keep discerning the contrast between world and earth, the flow following the way and what stands against it.

The answer of the master may also be seen as telling that simply by quantifying the scriptures he read, the disciple showed that he still is a slave to the things of the world. The master plays with him by asking, and he wants to make him see the weakness of his own method by inverting the hierarchy of values of his world: less is more. The man who learns accumulates knowledge of the scriptures, while the man who follows the way progressively abandons what he has learned before. Wanting to liberate himself from the yoke of the things of the world, he lets books and scrolls be reclaimed by the earth. He satisfies his thirst for knowledge with fewer and fewer pages, fewer and fewer words, until he reaches the point where he can see the world as a whole in a single one of them, like someone contemplating the whole of the creation in the reflection on the surface of a pearl. Then, he may begin to see the whole as a single thing of the world. The earth, the world, the sky,

and the way may be seen as a unique character written throughout the firmament, encompassing all. This is when he can read the only scripture that matters, the one written on the line traced by the way itself: the flow of nature, which runs through time and space and can be read like an open book to those whose mind has been freed from the slavery of things, and are thus able to decipher the language of nature, which is displayed for all to see since the beginning of the universe, but to which we are blind because of our attachment to the things of the world, the lens through which we see all things and that makes us blind to the truth of nature.

The master played with the things of the world to point out the way toward liberation from the yoke of the world. He himself appeared to play by its rules, asking a question, a number of scriptures that are read daily, but he ultimately uses the weapons of the world to show that its architecture is flawed, telling the young monk that he will not be in harmony with the way until he severs the ties binding him to the things of the world, and lets these things be, so that he and the world may both be free from the constraints imposed by each other. If men cease to grasp the things of the world, the world will take a different form. Its building blocks will not need to have definite boundaries or even pretend to accurately represent the earth and the sky. A world inhabited by men of the way, men who do not force it into submission to their own will, is fundamentally different from the one we are used to seeing. The *Blue Cliff Record* thus describe it:

海晏河清。

琉璃殿上無知識。

“The sea is calm, the rivers are clear.

Within the crystal palace, there’s no one who knows.”³⁸

The crystal palace is a world inhabited by players, men who have released all the things in its midst and have let them *be*. It does not know the commotion of a world filled with people striving to build, to destroy, to transform, or to reach its top. It is like an ocean during clement weather, with only gentle waves that

³⁸ Original Chinese text from: 吳平, 《新譯碧巖集(上)》, p. 219. English translation from: Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 115 (18th case).

琉璃殿上無知識

harmoniously sweep the shore and sing their soothing song. It is a stream calmly flowing down a valley, without encountering any significant opposition, no resistance to its passing. Without violent strife, without conflict with the earth in the form of boulders standing in its way or masses of dirt hindering its running, its water is limpid, letting the fire from the sky pass through it to offer a vision of the earth below it to those who stand by its banks.

A river is muddied when the flow of its waters is struggling against the earth, or when someone steps into the riverbed and stirs up the dirt that lies under the stream. Likewise, the world is troubled by the tumult of the men busying themselves inside it, grasping, building, and moving things, battling against one another to impose their vision upon it, to leave their imprint for the ages to come. In contrast with this, when the heart of the dwellers of this world has been soothed by the song of the flow of nature and they have released the things that they had firmly grasped, the agitation of the world begins to fade away. The particles of mud that dirtied the world can begin to settle, letting its true nature finally be uncovered. The world then mirrors the mind of the dwellers: it becomes translucent, letting the light of the sky shine through it, without distortion and without being absorbed and concealed. Each one of the dwellers smoothly plays with the things composing this world, not trying to force these things to show them the earth or the sky in a certain way, and not spending their forces to define their contours.

A world inhabited by players is a world that can barely be seen, a world that does not occupy the front scene of man's mind. It lets itself be forgotten so that men would focus their attention on what lies beyond this world, what lets itself be seen from the transparent windows that the things of this world represent: the earth, the sky, and through them, the way itself. Within the crystal world, there is no one who grasps things, and things do not let themselves be grasped because they are blurry and soft, without definite boundaries that would allow men to seize them. It is not a world of knowledge, of certainty, explanations, and understanding, but rather a world that serves the earth and the sky, an interface that allows man's own self to exist as something that stands out of earth and sky and yet is able to interact with them through his body and his senses. It is a world that, like man, stands out of the rest of the creation, but one that does not oppose the flow of

nature, one that does not muddy the water carried along the way.

The player is nonetheless not limited to playing with the things of the world: he may also play with the other dwellers. As seen earlier, he may play with men who are still prisoners of the things of the world, thereby showing them their own condition, but he may also have the chance of playing with other players. Master Linji gives us an example:

僧問：“如何是佛法大意？”師便喝。
 僧禮拜。師雲：“這個師僧，卻堪持論。”
 A monk asked, “What is the basic meaning of Buddhism?”
 The Master gave a shout. The monk bowed low.
 The Master said, “This fine monk is the kind who’s
 worth talking to!”³⁹

The monk still lacks experience. He still shows attachment to certain parts of the world and tries to use the things belonging to it to understand the path that has been shown to him, but he nonetheless also displays the qualities of a player. The monk tried to pull the master into the pit of worldly understanding, but like a fierce lion, his roar scared him enough and he let go. This roar of the master pulls the disciple back to the earth, and the monk comes to his senses. His reply is spread between the earth and the world. He uses a thing of the world, a gesture, that is as close to the earth as it can be. This body language shows that he has perceived the meaning of the roar, and that he is able to free himself from the slavery of the world, even if he sometimes may relapse due to his inexperience.

The master witnesses the liberation of the disciple and the effect of his lesson. He then decides to once again step into the world, playing with words and jokingly validating his progress toward the way. The player talks with his chest, sees with his ears, and hears with his eyes. He does not bind himself to logic or to reason, but plays with all things, perceiving that by playing with

³⁹ Original Chinese text from: 入矢, 《臨濟錄》, p. 22. English translation from: Linji-yixuan. *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A Translation of the Lin-Chi Lu*. Shambhala Publications, 1993. P. 9.

them, he extends his freedom and can thus accompany the flow carried along the way.

When two accomplished men of the way encounter each other, there is no longer need for the distinction between master and disciple, monk and layman. They can play with each other without obeying the rules of the world, but also without needing to necessarily reject these rules. To be a player is to be able to take and to release all things in a smooth, swift manner, without attachment. The man without attachments does not fear close contact with the things of the world, as he knows they will not take hold of him. He will let them go when the time has come to do so. He can use words or can remain silent. Whatever he does, he remains free, master of himself without needing to be master over other things, but he nonetheless accepts submission to one thing alone: the way itself, along which the creation is carried.

Master Linji thus describes such an encounter between accomplished players:

相逢不相識;
共語不知名。

“They meet yet do not recognize each other,
They speak with each other yet do not know
each other’s name.”⁴⁰

To recognize someone is to identify him as a thing inside man’s world, to appeal to his memory, and to give a place to this thing within the structure of his world. The world usually demands that we know to whom we are talking to, and that we recognize this person. If we do not know each other, we usually first introduce ourselves, thereby being introduced inside the world of the other person. This would imply asking his or her name, as a label that would be tied to them as things of the world, and would allow us to manipulate these things and to refer to them while talking to other people.

⁴⁰ Original Chinese text from: 入矢, 《臨濟錄》, p. 120. English translation based on: Linji-yixuan, *The Record of Linji*, p. 27, but modified to better fit the present work.

The players nonetheless do not need to abide by these rules of the world. Focusing on the experience of the encounter by itself, and especially its sensory components, they disregard the game of introductions. They neglect to let the image of the face of the one standing in front of them sink into their mind and be transformed into a thing, part of their world's architecture. They remain in the crystal palace, where nothing is known and nothing is identified, put into little boxes with carefully chosen labels glued upon them. They refuse to know the name of this person, as this would spoil their play. They both walk on the edge between earth and world, sensation and cognition, matter and mind. They playfully speak to one another, as a display of their freedom from things, or as a means to test and tempt each other, seeing how easily the other would let himself be dragged back into worldly understanding. It is the privilege of the player to let himself be entrapped while knowing the danger of it, because it offers him a reminder of where he comes from, and where he is now.

The man of the way may nonetheless still be vulnerable. Free from worldly understanding, he may want to take refuge in other forms of things, things that would neither belong to the earth nor to the world, things that would pull him up toward the way instead of pulling him down: these are the things of the sky, what is seen above the horizon of the earth and what transcends the world. As appealing as they may be in comparison with other things, they nonetheless present similar dangers.

Chapter 3

The Things of the Sky

3.1 The Sky

The sky may appear to be the realm with which man is the least in contact: contrary to the earth, he cannot touch it and contrary to the world, he can neither build it, dwell in it, or manipulate it. He can only see it with his eyes, as something remote, inaccessible, and majestic. It inspires awe and wonder, precisely because of its mysterious nature, the fact that man can see it from anywhere on earth, during every day of his life, but cannot get any closer to what he sees displayed across the firmament. Until a little more than two centuries ago, men only could dream of elevating themselves in its heights, and the only way to stand above the clouds was to climb to the summit of the highest mountains. Technological progress has allowed us to describe it in more detail, but the glory of the sky and the respect it inspires has nonetheless not been diminished whatsoever by it. Technology has instead only stimulated the desire to depart from the earth to explore the depths of the heavens.

The men who created the first Chinese ideogram described the earth as a lump of clay and a snake.¹ The world has been depicted by them as a field, with a man standing nearby.² The sky, on the other hand, is described as a what is found above man's head,³ in the form of either line, a circle, or a square, according to different variants, placed on the top of a standing man:



Man stands in the world, above the earth and under the sky, and he is distinct from all three realms. He is made of earth and inhabits the world, but his eyes are turned toward the sky, whose embrace encompasses all things. He comes from the earth and is

¹ 地【dì】.

² 界【jiè】.

³ 天【tiān】.

now a prisoner of his world, and it is therefore all too natural for him to see the sky as the locus of his future. The only place where he has never been is where he is called to go, by nature itself, probably explaining why so many cultures have myths linking an afterlife to it.

Inside the world of the ancient Chinese people, earth and sky did not occupy an equal place, reflecting the very order of the creation, as it can be experienced by the senses, in the same manner today as the moment the first words were written down by our distant forefathers. As described by the Chinese philosopher, in a quote already mentioned at the beginning of the present work:

人法地，
地法天，
天法道，
道法自然。

“Man takes his law from the earth;
The earth takes its law from the sky;
The sky takes its law from the way.
The law of the way is its being what it is.”⁴

The sky is more than a simple counterpart to the earth: it is what encompasses the whole of nature, what is carried along the way. This is why the way is called the way of the sky (天道⁵), and not the way of the earth, of the world, or of man. The sky therefore contains the earth, the world, and life itself, and it represents the greatest thing that man can experience directly with his senses. He may indeed be aware of the nature of the way and witness its effects on the whole of nature, but he cannot experience the way directly, with his body. It cannot be seen with the eyes, or felt with one's fingers, but only be inferred from man's experiences of the sky and all the things that it contains. To welcome the light of the most distant stars illuminating the night sky into his eyes and to let it fill his mind with wonder, knowing that he is one with

⁴ Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 52. English translation based on the one found in: Lao Tzu, *The Tao Teh Ching*, np. but modified to better fit the present work (Ch. 25).

⁵ 【tiān dào】.

人法地
地法天
天法道
道法自然

the whole that he sees, may be the closest man will ever get to experiencing the way with his senses.

To get to know this natural order between the realms is a first step toward the sky. In the words of Zhuangzi:

知天之所為者，天而生也。

“To know what the heaven can do is to know that everything comes from the heaven.”⁶

Other steps imply the unfolding of the different dimensions of the sky, each one of which plays a different role in man's life. The sky is indeed more than the firmament enveloping the earth. It first represents the very fabric of the creation.

The sky is the space that allows the being of all beings. It is the expense in which all things can be, from the smallest grain of sand to the widest galaxy. The earth, the foundation of most of the things of our world, rests upon it. The blue planet may appear suspended in the emptiness of the cosmos, but it nonetheless occupies a place and has an extension that is allowed and constrained by the sky itself, as the primordial space in which matter can be.

Our experience of the sky is nevertheless richer: when we look upward as we stand in the open country, what we see is not a foundation for the earth. It is not a field in which material objects are simply stored. It rather presents us with a wondrous display, in which things of the sky dance with each other, offering us a play of light and shadows, colors and shapes, with each thing set upon its own course, sweeping through the firmament while giving a pace to the life on earth, not only the one of men, but also those of countless creatures that are often more aware and attentive to the signs of the sky than most of the men of the world, who are blinded by the bland brilliance of the realm built upon the earth.

Modern science has shed a new light on the intertwined nature of space and time, but men could already witness the inextricability of the two by observing the realm enfolding the earth. Space is what allows the earth to exist, by occupying a small portion of

⁶ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 88. English translation from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 89.

the heavenly expense. Time is what allows all the things that *are* to move within this expense, to evolve, to come to being and to see this being be extinguished by the work of the sky, which is the flow of time itself. From the dawn of mankind up until now, the flow of time has been quantified by men using the work of the sky, the course of the celestial bodies, in particular. The sun gave us the measure of the days and the years, and the moon the one of the months. The traces of the work of the sky are nonetheless found deeper than man's world. His very flesh has been shaped by the course of things of the sky. It is because the sun retreats beyond the horizon each passing day that man has developed the need to sleep, to let his body rest as the darkness reign upon the face of the earth, while offering him the comfort of dreams during this time when he is blinded by the night. Men are therefore as much sons of the sky as those of the earth, and many have been conscious of this fact long before the beginning of history.

The majesty of the sky and the greatness of the things filling it has therefore led man to respect and fear this realm. It brings the blessings of sunlight and rain that allow him to grow food, but its wrath can also bring death and famine, in the form of thunder, tempests, droughts, or hail, when the equilibrium between earth and sky has been disturbed. Contrary to the earth, which is calm and silent, the sky appears to speak to man, using both vision and sounds, and men therefore have often searched for ways to reply to these signs from above. As the vessel in which all beings are contained, and the grandest force that man can see in motion, the sky naturally becomes the target of his yearning for transcendence. The mystery that it presents invites him to seek answers. He wants to see beyond the boundaries of space and time, and peer into the secrets of being. Unable to do so, he pays homage to the things of the sky with which he can enter into contact, even if it is only with his eyes. These things may become symbols of his yearning for something more than what he can find on the earth and within the world. The sky itself may also receive this honor, or man may simply consider that what he desires is covered by the firmament, as a veil protecting and hiding a treasure.

Different cultures have put different names on the thing that man attempts to understand when he considers the whole of nature, and when he contemplates the nature of being. Some of them have given it the attributes of a man, seeing it as a human-shape

deity, while others have identified it simply as an ungraspable and unique god. It has also been named “the sacred,” “the holy,” “the transcendence.” Names that attempt to seize something that would represent a satisfying answer to the yearning induced by the mystical experience of a communion with the whole of nature. In Chinese, an exclamation would not imply an appeal to God, like it is frequent in English, but rather one to “the old sky” (老天⁷), or simply to the sky. In the *Treatise on the Way and Virtue*, the philosopher identifies the leader of the people as a “son of the sky” (天子⁸),⁹ whereas in the Chinese folk-religion derived from the philosophy of the way, the so-called “Daoism,” different deities are seen as rulers of the creation as associated with the sky itself, such as the “primeval Lord of the sky” (元始天尊¹⁰). Even the Catholic Church, when confronted to the dilemma of choosing a Chinese word to designate the God of monotheism, crafted the word 天主,¹¹ which literally means “Lord of the sky.”

The sky is therefore the natural place toward which a man searching for the source of the being of all beings turns himself. The way of the sky represents another name that aims at referring to what cannot be talked about, as the philosopher reminded us: “the way that can be spoken of is not the eternal and unchanging way.”¹² Man nonetheless needs to condensate the way and represent it as a things of the sky, so that he would be able to follow and embrace it, and show it to others, a thing that, when the time will have come, he will also be able to release.

Other terms also represent similar things of the sky that may be useful for the man of the way, but also be dangerous as well: the word “Buddha” is a good example. Originally simply designating “the awakened” Siddhartha Gautama, whose life and teaching became the source of the Buddhist religion, it also came to designate the state of “awakening” that would come to all those who properly put into practice these teachings. Linking this awakening with

⁷ 【lǎo tiān】.

⁸ 【tiān zǐ】.

⁹ See the 62nd chapter of the *Treatise on the Way and Virtue*: “故立天子，置三公，雖有拱璧以先駟馬，不如坐進此道。”

¹⁰ 【Yuán shǐ Tiān zūn】.

¹¹ 【tiān zhǔ】.

¹² This is the opening sentence of the *Treatise on the Way and Virtue*: “道可道非常道，名可名非常名。”

the dissolution of the ego into the whole of nature, it also came to represent the aforementioned transcendence, without defining it whatsoever. The Chinese word for “Buddha” (佛¹³) often bears this meaning, especially when it is used by the followers of the Chan tradition. The word “Chan” (禪¹⁴), originally derived from the Sanskrit word for “meditation,” has also been transformed into a thing of the sky, used as a label representing the path to be followed in order to liberate oneself from things and to embrace the way of the sky, purposefully avoiding such direct explanations and definitions, which imply a form of attempt at grasping that goes against the way. All these things are part of man’s world, but they are linked to the sky because they represent what transcends all three realms of the creation. They are pointing toward the thing that enfolds what encompasses all the things that man can personally experience with his senses: the sky itself.

A last dimension of the sky is its nature as the bright realm, the place from where man receives the light that allows him to see all the things encompassed by the firmament. It stands in contrast with the earth, which for the most part would be plunged in darkness without the brilliance of the sky. The alternation between night and day offers a spectacle reminding us daily of the key role played by the most visible things of the sky: the celestial bodies. The Dark (陰【yīn】) dances with the Bright (陽【yáng】), the earth with the sky, and their complementarity allows life to be. The sun, the moon, and the stars not only offer the light necessary for the plants to grow, and therefore for countless creatures to feed themselves, they also are used as compasses by many animals who follow their course to plan their migrations, their reproduction, or choose a place to build a shelter. The earth is the realm of the senses, what can be touched, smelled, heard, tasted, and seen, while the sky stands above, only accessible to the eyes. It nonetheless serves as the locus where man can project his ambitions, his hopes, and his faith. The world is built higher and higher, in an attempt to reach the sky, either to explore or to conquer it. What man sees when he looks upwards, toward the heavens, is a realm that offers him knowledge: a light, which is not only the literal brilliance but also represents a metaphorical enlightenment. It is no coincidence if knowledge is often linked

¹³ 【fó】.

¹⁴ 【chán】.

with light. The darkness imply ignorance, the night during which man cannot see the predators and enemies that would want him harm, and cannot move upon the face of the earth without danger of injuring himself.

Sleep ends when the sun rises above the horizon and illuminates the face of the earth. Man is then awakened. The awakening sought by followers of the “awakened one” (Buddha) is therefore tied to a spiritual dawn. The enlightenment desired by the one embracing the way is also linked to a worldly sky, a source of light that would shine within his heart and his world, and transform him to the core. This once more explains why the sky is seen as the place where what man seeks may be revealed to him, and why the essence of the being of all beings is thought to be found among the things of the sky. These things may represent milestones guiding the follower closer to the way, but they remain things, belonging both to the sky and to the world, and they therefore present the same dangers as other things. Even the best of things will always fail to be as good as no-thing. The fact that a chain is made of gold does not change its nature, and the one bound by it is as much a prisoner as any other. Someone embracing the way will therefore need to perform the ultimate release, the one of what he holds most dear, what appears the least harmful, and yet represents the hardest thing to let go: the things of the sky.

3.2 Awareness of the Things of the Sky

All things exist as “things” only in man’s world, in his mind, but this world is nonetheless grounded. The things of the earth are seen as earthly because they can be the source of a direct sensory experience: they can be touched, seen, smelled, heard, or tasted. Purely worldly things, on the other hand, are only the fruit of his imagination. They cannot be experienced directly, but they allow him to better make sense of the whole of nature. The things of the sky differ from the two other categories of things because the sky is both a place that can be seen with the eyes, like many things that it contains such as the celestial bodies and their light, and one on which man projects what he considers to be the source and the secret of the being of all beings, including himself. It is the seat of God or gods, the dwelling place of the departed, or the storehouse of the spirits. Someone achieving liberation from life and death may be able to go beyond the frontiers of the sky and thereby stand outside of time and space. The way itself would be found behind the firmament, as it is what guides the course of the sky and all that it contains.

The things of the sky therefore represent an unequal group, mixing things that can be seen and experienced with others that only represent conjectures, projections of man’s hopes and faith or attempts at representing the source of an experience of the numinous. The greatest tangible things are thus mixed with others that may completely lack ground, being rooted in pure fantasy or falsehood. They may therefore bring man closer to the way than he could ever be, but also plunge him deeper into the pit of delusion and blindness than any thing of the earth. Far more dangerous than jade and gold are the things of the sky, because they present themselves to man cloaked in a veil of sanctity and truth. They lure those who are repulsed by the riches of the earth and the high places of the world, inviting them to reach out to the heavens, but once these men let these things take hold of their mind, they once again become prisoners of things, blind to their own condition.

Fortunately, awareness of the dangers of the things of the sky may come to man, either by itself or brought on by a skillful teacher. Yunmen is one of those, as shown by the following dialogue:

僧問雲門：「如何是佛？」

門云：「乾屎橛。」

A monk asked Yunmen: "What is the Buddha?"

He answered: "A dry shit-stick."¹⁵

The monk wants to bring a thing of the sky to his world, so that it could be analyzed, defined, and understood. This shows the very danger of condensing the sky into things: instead of elevating those who use this concept, this thing, it only veils the sky and keeps man inside the darkness of his world. The monk yearns for unity with the sky, but he searches for the immensity of the heavens inside a small box. Worse, this box now holds him prisoner: he has thrown himself inside it and it now controls him. His mind is constantly preoccupied with this strange, ungraspable object, which he tries to define, whose contours he attempts to discern, but the harder he holds it, the quicker it slips away from him. Just like other things of the earth and the world, he becomes possessed by what he wants to possess.

Fortunately for the monk, he is not alone. A man of the way is there, ready to save him as he stumbles and falls. The disciple is holding the hand of the master and thus could take him down as well, but the master's feet are securely anchored into the ground, and he therefore begins to pull the monk back up. The question attempts to drag the master into vain worldly disputes, but his answer points back to the earth. He indeed knows the nature of the sky and, in particular, the fact that it includes the whole of the earth. Instead of searching for the meaning of "Buddha" in unreachable parts of the sky or in the loftiest chambers of the world, he is invited to look below, to pay attention to the parts of the earth that are considered the most remote from the idea of things that are holy, sacred, or divine. The shit-stick that is thrown away as quickly as possible after its use is as much part of the whole that is encompassed by the sky as any other thing. What he seeks may therefore be found in the lowest, dirtiest things around him. One does not need to reach the heavens in order to get closer to the way. The way guides all things, and therefore the

¹⁵ Original Chinese text from: 釋聖定. 《禪宗無門關譯注》. 釋聖定, 1995. P. 93. TBA; A "shit-stick" was the "toilet-paper" of the time.

sensory contact with the earth can lead someone to embrace the way often more efficiently than the contemplation of the things of the sky or the pondering of those of the world.

Another similar dialogue may shed further light on this question:

僧問：「如何是道？」

師曰：「出門便見。」

A monk asked: "What is the way?"

The master answered: "Go out and you'll see."¹⁶

The way of the sky is not meant to be brought into man's world to be dissected by the knife of reason. In order to get closer to it, man only needs to be in contact with the flow of nature, the whole which is carried along the way. Once the dazzling lights of his world have been dimmed, he just needs to open up his eyes to see the work of the sky and witness the fact that the course of the heavens perfectly follows the way, and that only his world and ego may disturb it, albeit very insignificantly. The master nonetheless mentions a prerequisite to the direct experience of the way: he first needs to go out.

The injunction to go out may here be seen as having a dual dimension, both of which being intertwined. It first naturally implies a departure from the secluded spaces that he uses as shelter from the wrath of the sky and the other forces of nature, that is, buildings made with man's hands and in which the natural character of the materials from which they are made has been veiled and is now unrecognizable. The open-country stands against the cities, the natural spaces opposed to artificial ones, the fruit of man's imagination and of his work. It is there that the way of the sky may be perceived, not only above the earth but also on its surface and in all the things lying upon its face, as the previous dialogue reminded us. No need for the disciple to study the way or even to understand it. He merely needs to let his own self be soaked by it, as he lets himself be caught in the flow of nature, without opposing any resistance.

¹⁶ Original Chinese text from: 周裕锳. 《禅宗语言》. 浙江人民出版社, 1999. P. 39. TBA.

A second dimension of the master's answer may appear if it is seen as an invitation for the disciple to liberate himself from the prison in which he is still bound in chains. Asking this naive question once more shows that the monk is indeed still caught in the logic of the world, unable to find the door that would show him the way. He is therefore ordered to leave the world behind for a while, as what he searches for cannot be found within its walls. Only by going out, directly interacting with the earth and the sky, may the way let itself be uncovered.

As they are brought into man's world to become "things," "words," or "concepts," the things of the sky lose most of their heavenly nature. The incomprehensible, the numinous, and the transcendence that man seeks in the sky are reduced to being simple things of the world among countless others, to which man will be enclined to become attached, and that will lead him to think that to under-stand these concepts would mean that he would under-stand the nature of the sky itself and of all that it contains. As a man of the way, the master points out the direction that the disciple is to take rather than vainly explains him the nature of the danger that threatens him.

The nurturing of an awareness of man's condition as a slave to the things of the sky nonetheless takes time. The inexperienced seeker of the way will need more guidance, first by nature itself, but also by men who have already found the way. The Chan tradition offers us an account of such guidance, once again in the form of a brief but straight to the point dialogue:

昔有行者隨法師入佛殿，
行者向佛唾，云行者去就，
何唾佛，者云將無佛處來某甲唾，師無對。
Once there was a monk who accompanied a Buddhist
priest [not of Zen] to a Buddhist temple.
There the monk spat at the statue of Buddha.
The priest said. "You have little sense of propriety!
Why do you spit at Buddha?"
The monk said, "Show me the place where there
is no Buddha so that I can spit there."
The priest was speechless.¹⁷

A variant on the same theme is found in the *Record of Master Xutang* (虛堂語錄):

昔有道士在殿前背佛而坐，
僧云道流莫背佛，
士云大德佛身充滿於法界，
教我向甚處坐。

There was once a Taoist priest who came to a Buddhist temple and sat with his back to the statue of Buddha. A monk said: "You Taoist, don't you turn your back on Buddha."

The Taoist said: "The virtuous Buddha exists everywhere. Tell me where I can sit."¹⁸

Skillfully allying humor, shock value, and an invitation to shake up the foundations of one's world, this is the mark that makes so-called "Zen stories" such efficient tools leading men to embrace the way, and these dialogues represent good examples of this tradition.

Man needs the world in order to make sense of the earth and the sky, and to find the way before he can embrace it. He brings the way into his world in the form of things of the sky, things that may or may not accurately depict its nature, but no matter how accurately these things represent the truth of the way, men will tend to grow too attached to these things. The images soon become idols, and the sign replaces what it was meant to represent. In both dialogues, such behavior can be observed: what is perceived as an offense toward the statues of Buddha is considered to be an offense against Buddha himself, as if the statues were equivalents to the thing that they depict. The things' power grew together with the attachment of the monks toward them, like the mesh of a fisher's net whose grip on the fish increases as it moves, trying to swim

¹⁷ Original Chinese text from: 破有法王. 《現代相似禪評論》. 周文社, 1916. P. 283. English translation from: Kido. *Every End Exposed: The 100 Koans of Master Kido - With the Answers of Hakuin*. Trans. by Yoel Hoffmann, Autumn P, 1977. P. 69 (Also found in the 指月录).

¹⁸ Original Chinese text from: 破有法王, 《現代相似禪評論》, p. 286 (Secondary quote from the 虛堂語錄); English translation from: Kido, *Every End Exposed*, p. 76.

away. Here, the thing has effectively succeeded in supplanting what it was meant to represent: the inexperienced priest and the monk have become blind to the truth of Buddha, which is not located or incarnated in a precise location, as they look at the statue while ignoring the whole of nature and the way itself.

The thing of the sky not only has been reduced into a thing of the earth, a statue. It also has been forcefully inserted into a worldly hierarchy in which it does not belong. It may hold a place of honor in the world, pushing men to bow before it, to refrain from spitting on it, or not to turn their back to it, but this worldly position only hides further the nature of what it was originally meant to represent. By creating an unnatural separation between Buddha and the rest of the whole of nature as they transform it into a thing of the sky placed into a world, standing in contrast and opposed to countless other things, they plant the seed of falsehood into their own world. Far from pointing out the direction of the way, it further conceals it. Fortunately, some are aware of the presence of this danger. With a simple move, playing with the thing that is held too dear by others, these men are able to shake the foundation of the world of their brethren with just a few words of explanation, pointing out the mistaken nature of the representations offered by this world, their remoteness from the truth of the way, and the fact that these brethren serve their own earthly and worldly idols instead of the thing of the sky itself.

These two stories tell us about the Buddha, but the same process tends to occur with all the things of the sky: God, gods, Chan, Zen, or even the way itself. The danger of things is always present. They at all times threaten to enslave those who attempt to grasp, to possess, or to define them. The signs always want to replace what they represent, and therefore man should remain vigilant and listen to the advice of those who let themselves be carried along the way. The *Blue Cliff Record* offers us such advice concerning the danger of the things of the sky:

道個佛字，拖泥帶水；
 道個禪字，滿面慚惶。
 久參上士不待言之，
 後學初機直須究取。

To say the word "Buddha" is trailing mud and
 dripping water;
 to say the word "Ch'an" is a face full of shame.
 Superior people who have practiced for a long time
 do not wait for it to be said;
 latecoming beginners simply must investigate
 and apprehend it.¹⁹

The two words that are mentioned could be replaced by any other thing of the sky and the statement would still apply. This is because the all-encompassing sky cannot be reduced to a series of things placed in man's world. By creating things that would represent it, man already misses the mark and strays from the way. As said by the master, these things must nevertheless first be investigated and apprehended by those who have yet to see the way.

The beginner needs the things of the sky because he is still a man of the world, prisoner of it, whose only means to dis-cover the way of the sky is through the lens of these things created by other men. By exploring the concepts of "Buddha" or "Chan," which are mere caricatures of the truth of the sky, he nonetheless may begin to realize that what he seeks will not be found within the walls of his world. He may become aware of the difference between the things and what they represent, and when this will have occurred, he will be able to perceive the essence of these things: the fact that they were created as beacons meant to lead him outside of the boundaries of his world, lead him to the open-country, where the glitter and sparks of the world are forgotten and man can experience the hardness of the earth and the vast expense of the sky, forget himself in the flow of nature.

A man of the way will therefore have no need of these things

¹⁹ Original Chinese text from: 克勤. 《碧巖錄（上）》. 岩波文庫, 1994. P. 54.
 English translation from: Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 10 (2nd case).

of the sky, which are parts of the world, meant to guide the men of the world toward the way. He will only use them as baits that would allow him to catch the fish swimming in the pond of the world and bring them out of its muddy waters. He will not fear shame if he utters these words, and he will not fear to plunge in the watery mud by using them, because shame and dirtiness are themselves things of the world, that are of no concerns for a man who does not dwell in the world but rather spends most of his time on the naked earth, embracing the sky. We, as men still searching for the way, nonetheless need to investigate further the things of the sky before trying to release them.

3.3 Examination of the Things of the Sky

The examination of the things of the sky is particularly delicate, as even though they often originate from a sensory experience, what is usually called a “religious experience” or a contact with the numinous, they also represent some of the loftiest elements of the world, things that are highly “metaphysical,” remote from the reality of the earth. Nonetheless, it is precisely because of this tricky nature that these things should be diligently examined, even if one already knows that he will have to let them go at some point in his spiritual journey.

The following words are famous in the Chan tradition, and they may give us a hint concerning the nature of the things of the sky in general:

心佛不二，故言 . . . 即心即佛。
 “Mind and Buddha are not separate,
 Therefore it is said ... Mind is Buddha.”²⁰

Master Wumen said that a man of the way would shut his ears and flee upon hearing the words “Mind is Buddha,”²¹ but the vulgarity of these words nonetheless does not imply that they have nothing useful to show us.

Man seeks what he does not have. Someone wanting to become a Buddha does so because he does not think he is one. Likewise, someone seeking the way is someone who believes that he does not stand in its flow or cannot see it. Those who stand upon the face of the earth see the sky as something distant, unreachable and mysterious, but once they perceive the nature of the sky, they see that it represents the whole of which they are part, and whose division into separate things is only an illusion created by the mind. The men of the earth are also men of the sky, as it not only encompasses all: it *is* all. What they seek is their own nature, whose secret is not hidden beyond the stars or the celestial

²⁰ Original Chinese text from: 赤根祥道. 《一分禪》. 漢風, 1989. P. 168. TBA.

²¹ Original Chinese text: “若是箇漢。見說即心是佛。掩耳便走。” From: 釋聖定, 《禪宗無門關譯注》, p. 126 (30th case). TBA.

dome, but rather readily apparent, all around them and within themselves.

The earth and all living things are made of the same elements as the sun, the moon, and the stars. All occupy the same space, and they are all carried through the flow of time. The sky is the foundation of all, and all that came to being out of it still possesses a heavenly nature. The things of the sky only represent different viewpoints of the one thing that is carried along the way. These things have their purpose, as it is because of them that man may be able to see that his ego and attachment to things prevent him from experiencing a life in harmony with the oneness of the sky, all that it contains, and with the way that guides their course.

Furthermore, the only thing that may perhaps be seen as standing out of the oneness of the sky and all that it contains is man's ego and the parts of his world that are not based on earth or sky. His will is the only thing that may go against the flow of nature, even though it only does so on an insignificantly small scale. To follow the way therefore demands that man relinquishes this power, that he lets his self be dissolved in the flow of nature. To follow the way of the sky is to be like the sky: without ego, without will, not seeking anything, even knowledge of the nature of the way of the sky itself. As the Chinese philosopher tells us:

天地不仁，以萬物爲芻狗。

“Heaven and earth do not act from (the impulse of) any wish to be benevolent; They deal with all things as the dogs of grass are dealt with.”²²

To follow the way is to be like the sky. It demands nothing. It gives nothing. Man may thank the sky for the rain that waters his field and allows him to continue to live, but the sky did not offer him this rain as a personal gift, and it is left unmoved by his gratitude. It is neither benevolent nor malevolent, but only flows, running through the easiest path. This nonetheless does

²² Original Chinese text from: 阿部吉雄, 《新釈漢文大系〈7〉老子 莊子上卷》, p. 19. English translation from: Lao Tzu, *The Tao Teh Ching*, np. (Ch. 5).

天
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not necessarily represent a dismissal of the concept of “god,” that is, of a will that would either be at the origin of the impulse that set the flow of nature in motion, or be able to trace the path taken by this flow, to shape the way itself. It may or may not be so, but for the follower of the way, this question is of little importance. To embrace the way does not imply an understanding of its origin or of its mechanics. What man can see with his eyes and touch with his hands is the flow itself, which does not appear “micromanaged” by anything or anyone. Man can see that the earth and the sky do not obey the will of any man. Until he sees someone who would be able to deviate and control the flow of nature, he will not let himself be disturbed by the realm of possibilities and probabilities. The man of the way simply follows its course.

Once man has seen the clarity of the sky in the reflection of his own eyes, he suddenly has no need of the things of the sky that are supposed to show it to him. A man in a prison cell needs a window to contemplate the sky beyond its walls, but once he is free, outside in the open-country, he does not need to look at the sky through a sheet of glass. It is not only useless for him to carry this piece of glass outside, it also distorts his vision. Thus comes the time for him to let this thing go.

3.4 The Release of the Things of the Sky

Contrary to the things of the earth, those of the sky cannot be stolen or lost. They are the most durable of things, being passed from generation to generation, many of them throughout the whole history of man, and yet they are always changing, being continuously adapted to better fit the world in which they are seen. They are the most accessible of things, as even the poorest man on earth may possess them, and yet they represent the most unreachable elements of the creation. These things, which are inalienable and unperishable, therefore will be those that a man walking on the path of liberation from the yoke of things will be the most reluctant to let go. They not only appear harmless: they lift him up toward the heavens, bringing him closer to the object of his yearning, or so he thinks.

The problem, as was the case with the things of the earth and those of the world, is not the things themselves, but rather the imbalance found in man's relationship with these things. Such a relationship with the things of the sky is particularly delicate: while the things of the earth are easily grasped, both by the hands and by the mind, it is not the case with their celestial equivalents. Reflecting the nature of what we see in them with our eyes, smoky clouds carried through the air or the winds causing the army of leaves of the forests to raise their voices, the things of the sky do not let themselves be snatched away and brought into the world easily. They belong to the lofty heights, and they waste away when they are brought down below, into man's world, like a phoenix that would be locked in a cramped cage in a lightless basement. When they are brought into man's world as "things," they become representations, and are grasped and defined by man's mind. Attempting to define these celestial things within the world is of course to mistreat and to caricature them. The majesty of the sky is thereby turned into things that are remote from their model: vulgar, simple, clear-cut. The relationship between man and the things of the sky is therefore firstly one of subjugation and corruption.

The sky nonetheless faces no threat from the actions of man and the turpitudes of his insignificant world standing against its majesty. The sky is indeed unscathed by the attempt to turn it

into things, parts of his world. It is all an illusion: the only things that man is able to grasp and take away from the celestial vault are mere images, representing the truth of the sky, and not elements of the sky itself. To grasp the word "God," invoking its name, and to think that one can thereby reach the highest parts of the heavens is to insult the sky. The sky may remain impassive to the offenses of men, but they thereby dig a pit in which they are sure to fall. They are blind to the difference between their world and the truth of the creation, and they therefore mistake their control and understanding of the things of the sky, that they partly constructed themselves, based on a direct sensory experience or simply their imagination, for an ability to grasp the way of the sky itself, the course of the creation. This delusion corrupts their relationship with the reality of the sky and all that it encompasses.

Furthermore, the things of the sky that are brought into man's world present the same danger as other things found in this world: the more he gets attached to them, the more these things hold power over him. Convinced that he knows the sky because he grasps images of it, he serves these things as idols, seeing in them the source of his own being. Spending his days and his strengths for the service of these things, he grows more and more distant from the truth of the sky. The "religious experience" is replaced by religious law, and mystical proximity with the whole of the sky is neglected in favor of the dissection of the things of the sky present in his world, using the scalpel of reason to seek to uncover the mysteries of the creation and find the meaning of life. A man straying from the way, enamored with the artificial beauty and illusory power of the world, will therefore be at least as much enslaved by the things of the sky as by those of the earth or the purely worldly ones.

The things of the sky are nonetheless particularly insidious, because whereas someone can relatively easily be convinced of the fact that gold and riches can come to control man and be detrimental to his life, the things of the sky appear to help those who are possessed by them. What more natural would it be for man to entrust his fate to them: God, gods, Buddha, the way, they are the great forces supposed to rule over the creation, and a man knowing his place should therefore devote his life to them. The sign is nonetheless different from what it represents. The things of the sky that man holds dear may stand against the truth of

the sky, as man can experience it, witnessing the work of the sky and the whole of nature. Entrusting his life to these things may lead him not only to be blind to the truth of the sky, but to rebel against nature itself, if these things have been corrupted or simply were poorly crafted.

A man of the way should therefore not get too attached to any “thing,” even the things he uses as guides for an unveiling of the way. Once the fish has been caught, one does not need to continue carrying the fishing rod. This will demand a certain practice and the guiding hand of wiser men. The following quote gives us a first exercise:

念佛一聲，漱口三天。
Utter the word “Buddha” once,
and wash your mouth for three days.²³

To utter such a word is to condense the boundlessness of the sky into a small, vulgar thing. It may sometimes be useful or necessary for someone to do so, but he then should not hold on to this thing, treating it as a noxious substance ready to eat away the skin of his hands. To wash his mouth means to remain mindful of this danger, and to use these things parsimoniously so that they would not enslave him and veil the truth of the sky.

To use such words, such things of the sky present within man’s world, also represents a conflation of the two realms, even if this conflation is only illusory, existing only as a mirage. The sky encompasses the earth and the world, and therefore the sky cannot be contained by the world. To attempt to bring the sky into man’s world is to disturb the order of nature itself, and to pretend that man’s mind would be its grandest force, as it would be able to grasp and understand the sky and all that it contains, looping the very structure of nature upon itself. Man may nonetheless become aware of the illusory nature of his power over things, of the fact that the things that he manipulates are only poor images of the truth of the sky. Reducing his contacts with these things to a minimum, and carefully cutting away the bonds tying him

²³ Original Chinese text from: 廖閱鵬. 《禪門語錄三百篇》. 圓神出版社, 1996. P. 244. TBA.

to them after each one of these contacts, he is able to prevent a conflation of the sky with the world. His hands have the power both to join and to keep at bay, and letting himself be guided by the flow of nature, he may let nature itself use this power through his agency, thereby maintaining the fragile equilibrium between world and sky.

The expression used by the master (念佛²⁴) nonetheless not only represents the uttering of the word “Buddha” but often also implies its invocation, as a form of prayer, such as the one repeated by monks during their daily rituals. The practice advised by the master may therefore also be applied to prayer in general. When man prays, he seeks the sky, lifting up his hands or turning them upwards, ready to receive the gifts of the heavens, but this shows that he fails to see that the sky is not only found above but rather permeates the whole of space and time. The sky is all around him, above and below, outside and inside him.

By invoking the name of the things of the sky, he seeks what he already has. He invites what is already here. He implores the things of the sky, so that they would come down below and occupy the sacred space that has been prepared for them, but he does not realize that this invocation only chases them away. Only the closest star, the sun, shines throughout the sky and illuminates the entirety of the face of the earth. This obvious light nonetheless only represents an insignificant part of the fullness of the sky. This fullness does not let itself be seen by those who actively seek it. Projecting strong, man-made light unto the sky will not allow him to reveal its nature. On the contrary, the more the earth shines, the more the sky retreats into darkness. The sky only reveals itself to those who let themselves be approached by it: when the earth is dark; when man has dimmed the light of his world, then is the faint, milky glow of the galaxy and the twinkling of the most distant stars displayed throughout the firmament; then does the sky show its extent. When man invokes the things of the sky, the light of his world conceals the truth of the sky. All that he sees is his world, dazzling him as the sky disappears in the shadows. The man of the way therefore does not need the things of the sky to interact with this realm that represents the foundation of nature. He does not invoke, but rather only lets itself be permeated by its

²⁴ 【niàn fó】.

flow.

Furthermore, the three days of washing mentioned by the master may be seen as more than mere hyperbole. They indeed are particularly fitting for someone wishing to avoid a conflation of world and sky. To be mindful of one's use of a thing of the sky for three days implies the witnessing of a significant work of the sky during this time. The earth rotates three times around itself. The sun goes up and down the horizon three times, while the moon subtly changes as it goes throughout the sky. Dawns and dusks give the pace of man's life, as the days follow the nights and man alternates a life on the earth and one in the world of dreams. These three days offer him plenty of time to contemplate the work of the sky and thereby let himself be permeated by it. It offers him a chance to experience the truth of the sky with his senses, after having spent brief instants handling a caricature of the sky crafted within his world, which started to conceal this truth.

What the master teaches us is the respective importance that the two realms should occupy in man's life. If he spends an instant uttering a word representing the things of the sky, he should spend three days in intimate contact with the truth of the sky to heal the wounds caused by this use of the world. The insignificance and sketchy nature of the world presents a great contrast with the immensity and perfection of the sky, just like the passing of an instant appears trivial when it is compared to the passing of entire days. Putting the advice of the master into practice, one may thereby personally experience the natural imbalance between world and sky, the fact that one is not equal to the other. This inequality should be reflected in the life of a man of the way, who would therefore still dwell in the world of men, and even visit its sacred spaces, the places where the things of the sky are represented in it, but he will be cautious to spend much more time in direct contact with the sky itself, as a sensory and non-verbal spiritual experience, than with the things present within the world of men. He will thereby always keep in mind a clear picture of the inequality between sky and world, and his life will become a reflection of the truth of the sky, the earth, and the world.

The Indian sage Boddidharma also tells us:

迷時有佛有法，
 悟時無佛無法。
 “When one is lost,
 there are Buddhas and (religious) laws,
 When one is enlightened,
 there are no Buddhas nor laws.”²⁵

To be lost is to stray from the way, which is full of the celestial light. Away from the light, one stays in the shadow cast by it, or simply remains enclosed within a space that it cannot reach. Such a space is man's world, which veils the light of the sky like a drape in front of a window. Prolonged seclusion within its walls causes him to forget the splendor that enfolds the whole of the creation, and his eyes only behold the images of it that were crafted by his distant forefathers, men whose world had yet to take such monumental proportions, and thus still were conscious of the difference between world and sky, as their world was too small to veil the entirety of the celestial wonders. He is blind to the truth of the sky and is unable to personally experience its majesty and real extent, which reaches the confines of the creation, even the deepest parts of the earth, including his own flesh. He attempts to satisfy his longing for communion with the whole of nature by playing with the things of the sky that are found within his world. Like a little child, he plays with “Buddhas” and “gods,” vainly trying to see the glory of the sky in them. He places them at the center of his world and rearranged the rest of the things present in it so that they would present a harmonious picture of the creation. Laws linked with the things of the sky organize man's relationship with these things and the place they occupy in his life. All of this work is done to allow him to convince himself that his world reflects the order of nature, and that he himself is able to understand and be part of this order.

In contrast with this, to be enlightened is to plunge oneself in the luminous way, to cease from straying and inhabiting the realm of shadows to find back the truth of nature. This occurs when man finds the strength to let all things go, abandoning his desire

²⁵ Original Chinese text from: 蔡志忠, 《蔡志忠漫画中国传统文化经典: 达摩禅 (中英文对照版)》, p. 133. TBA.

to possess or to under-stand, relinquishing his control over them and thereby also liberating himself from their invisible yoke. The light of nature comes from the sky, and it cannot reach the deepest parts of the world. Someone wanting to engulf his mind and body in the torrent of heavenly brilliance must therefore depart from his home, the world built by his ancestors and which held him prisoner of its illusions and delusions, and dis-cover the open air, a direct contact with the sky, unmediated by the things of the world, which absorb and distort its light. Outside of the world, outside of the realm of all the things produced by man's hands and mind, there no longer are "Buddhas" or laws, gods or scriptures, but only the oneness of the sky, following the course set by the way. His horizon is broadened, and he now beholds the truth of the sky. The light that fills his eyes causes the glitter of the world to vanish from his mind, and the world itself becomes a mere shadow. He continues to visit the world, and the images in which he sought the sky are still present in it, but his heart leads him away from it as soon as he can. He only comes back under the pressure of other men, who either want to see him put back the chains that bound him to the world in the past or ask him to tell stories concerning what lies beyond the walls of their prison, in hope that one day they would also gain their freedom and dis-cover the magnificence of the heavens, in the open-country where there are neither mind nor Buddha (非心非佛).

To lead men to let go of the things of the sky nonetheless often demands more than mere stories. It requires the assistance of a teacher, and time to put his teachings into practice. When the disciple strays from the way and attempts to pull the master back into the world instead of letting himself be led to the open-country, he should not hesitate to be firm, such as in this dialogue:

僧問：「如何是菩提。」

師打曰：「出去，莫向這裡屙。」

A monk asked: "What does 'Bodhi' mean?"

The master answered: "Go out! Don't bring shit in here."²⁶

²⁶ Original Chinese text from: 廖閱鵬, 《禪門語錄三百篇》, p. 341 (Secondary quote from: 景德傳燈錄 — 卷十五). TBA.

The question shows that the monk is still holding on to the images of the sky that are present in his world. He tries to hand one of these things to the master but is swiftly rebuked. No matter what this thing is, its presence soils the place where the master stands. The “here” that is mentioned by the sage is not a monastery, a sacred part of the earth, or his dwelling. It rather is the place where man finds himself when he has let go of all things; the place that appears once the larger parts of his world crumble when he stops supporting them with his hands. It is the place where “nothing” *is*, and where there is no “thing;” where there is no cold nor heat, and in which one cannot drive a nail. Beyond the frontiers of the world, there can true elevation be experienced, that is, distance from both the earth and the world. The Chinese sage Confucius (孔子²⁷) thus described the men venturing in such place:

畸人者，畸於人而侔於天。
 故曰：天之小人，人之君子；
 人之君子，天之小人也。
 He stands aloof from other men, but he is
 in accord with the sky!
 Hence it is said, “The small man of the sky
 is the superior man among men;
 The superior man among men is
 the small man of the sky!”²⁸

The monk and the master therefore stand in different places. The former is still a prisoner of the world, a slave to things, while the latter has seen the true sky appear beyond the fallen walls and roofs of the world: nature itself, what remains when the product of man’s hands has been given back to the earth. He therefore rebukes the disciple, who strays from the way of the sky and wades through the muddy water of the world, soiling the beauty and perfection of the way as he approaches it. He briefly ventures back into the world in order to point out his error, using the value system of this world to make him realize his mistake: excrement is in itself no different than any other substance present on the earth,

²⁷ 【kǒngzǐ】.

²⁸ Original Chinese text from: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 106. English translation based on the one published by James Legge in: *The Sacred Books of China*, p. 253, but modified to better fit the present work.

but he uses this image to shake him up, blaspheming and insulting his world, to make him see the difference between the things of the sky present in his world and the sky itself, as it can be perceived and experienced outside of the boundaries of the work of men, that is, where the open sky can be observed, far from the brilliance of the world.

On the one hand, the monk soils the sky with excrement, but on the other, the master purposefully muddies the things of the sky that his disciple holds dear. To compare the concept of “Bodhi” to excrement is to sully the world, to lessen its value in the eyes of men. This is not done malevolently. On the contrary, by tarnishing the things of the sky, he invites the monk to let them go, to drop them before they taint his hands and his mind. If he begins to put this teaching into practice, progressively seeing the true value of the things of the sky, which is to be mere tools meant to be used quickly to find the way out of the world and then dropped down, these things will then lose their luster. Their coat of gold will be stripped away from them by the fire of the sky, and their underlying truth will finally be revealed: they are no different than dung. If he reminds himself of this each time he handles these things of the sky, he will be able to free himself from these last things that bind him to the world and prevent him from bathing himself in the light of the sky that shines beyond the walls of his prison. Until he does so, an impassable chasm will remain between the two men.

The decision to release the last things will nevertheless also often come from a realization of the futility of his own work of edification and exploration of the world for the purpose of spiritual fulfillment. This work indeed does not bring him the contentment that can only come from a communion with the whole of the sky and with the way that sets its course, as a personal experience that shakes his mind and penetrates his bones. He must therefore face his own limits before he can transcend those of the world. As told by Zhuangzi:

天之所助，謂之天子。

學者，學其所不能學也；

行者，行其所不能行也；

辯者，辯其所不能辯也。

知止乎其所不能知，至矣；

若有不即是者，天鈞敗之。

“Those whom the sky helps are called the sons of the sky.

A scholar tries to learn what cannot be learned; a man tries to practise what cannot be practised; a rhetorician tries to argue about what cannot be argued. He who is contented with what he cannot know has reached perfection; he who is not contented with what he cannot know will be destroyed on the lathe of the sky.”²⁹

This is an invitation addressed to the men of the world, calling them to desert the world and to embrace the way of the sky. The whole of nature will help them if they do so, carrying them together with the rest of the creation, toward a place that they do not know and do not need to know in advance.

The men of the world, those who are still mired down in intellectual pursuits or those who try to elevate themselves above others on the earth, in the world, or in the sky itself, still attached to a definite hierarchy of values, are now resisting the flow of nature. They stand against the way of the sky, hoping to steer the flow of the creation, but as a piece of wood that is worn away on a lathe, they are bound to fail and disappear. The work of the sky carries all men toward their grave, no matter whether they embrace the way or oppose it, but the death of the latter will always

²⁹ Original Chinese text from Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 394. English translation based on those found in: Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, p. 395 and Zhuangzi. *The Writings of Chuang Tzu*. Trans. by James Legge, Ancient Wisdom Publications, 2017. np. but modified to better fit the present work. (Ch. 23); The word 天鈞, literally designating a heavenly potter's wheel, is rather cryptic and has been the subject of various interpretations. The translation chosen here is not perfect, but it seems to accurately convey the spirit of the original text.

be accompanied with frustration, whereas for the former it will come as a release from life, an extinction of the self and a return to the whole of the earth and the sky. One is a piece of driftwood that will be carried away across the earth by the work of the sky, to the ocean, from which all the waters come and where they all return. The other is a sharp blade inserted in the middle of the stream, which stays in place as it is slowly dulled by the flow, until it disappears. Both will one day vanish, but the driftwood was helped by the flow, and both reached their destination, whereas the blade only failed to achieve its purpose.

The son of the sky not only knows what is enough: he also knows what he cannot achieve, what he cannot know, and what he cannot do. He feels no frustration as he contemplates the extent of what he cannot reach. He does not merely let go of the things that he possesses, knows, or desires, but also of all the things that will forever remain out of his reach, because he knows his place within nature. The sky itself is among these. The release of the sky itself, as he sees it within his world, is the last step that will allow him to become a true son of the sky, that is, to have a relationship with it that is not based on possession and desire but rather on filiation and respect.

By tarnishing the things of the sky, the aforementioned masters worked to undermine the undeserved veneration of which they were the objects. They did not deserve it, firstly, because these things are different from the truth of the sky, as explained before. There is nonetheless another reason explaining why these last things should also be released: the fact of separating the whole of the creation into things that are sacred (聖³⁰) on the one hand, and others that are secular (凡³¹) on the other by itself represents a form of attachment that veils the truth of the sky. Thus, it is said:

超聖入凡。

“Go beyond the sacred, enter the secular.”³²

³⁰ 【shèng】.

³¹ 【fán】.

³² Traditional saying.

When a man begins to search for the way of the sky, it is appropriate to depart from the secular and to discover the sacred (超凡入聖), but once he has seen the path that he is meant to take, leading him outside of the world and to the open-country, he can abandon the sacred and go back to the secular, ultimately seeing the distinction between the two fading away as the light of the sky becomes brighter.

Once the things of the sky have been released, they nevertheless do not cease to exist. The man of the way may spend as much time as he can wandering in the open-country and contemplating the course of the sky, but he remains a man, and as such he will always sometimes return to visit the world, either driven there by his own need or dragged into it by other men, with all kinds of intentions. He may enjoy a direct relationship with the sky itself, as an experience that transcends the boundaries of the world, but he will also have to learn to deal with the things of the sky in a new manner, playing with them rather than possessing or being possessed by them.

3.5 Playing with the Things of the Sky

Once someone has released the last things that tied him to the world, only two things are left: his own self and the whole of nature against which it stands. Once the walls of the world have crumbled to the ground, his ego is like a tower made of fine sand that always remained sheltered and protected from the onslaught of the sky, but that now is left defenseless. Without the world serving as a barrier separating it from the sky, this sand structure that is now the only thing standing in contrast to the whole of nature begins to be eroded by the winds. Grain after grain, the building blocks of the tower are carried up in the heavens and made to sweep the earth, becoming fully part of the rest of nature, indistinguishable from the giant body formed by the earth and the sky. Soon, all that remains of this tower is a small protuberance, so insignificant that it does not break the harmony of the natural landscape around it. Free from things, the man of the way sees his ego reduced to its core, which is so small in front of the vastness of what is encompassed by the sky that it does not disturb the flow of nature.

Even reduced to its core and in harmony with the sky, the self therefore remains. Free from things, the man of the way will have to develop a relationship with the only thing that now stands in front of him in the open-country: the one, the whole, the sky itself rather than the images of it that he used to behold and manipulate within his world. The sky, seen as this whole of the universe, therefore may be the only thing toward which an attachment may not only not be harmful, but benefit him. To grasp and hold on to the whole of which he is part is not to possess or be possessed by it, but rather to be one with it, and to dilute his own self so that he would become as indistinguishable from it as possible. No reserve is necessary toward the whole of the sky: he may let himself be drowned in its light and taken upon the way, without fear, without worries, and without need to know what to expect, until his time comes and the protuberance representing his life is leveled by the work of the sky.

Before this event occurs, the man of the way has to learn to deal with the things of the sky that are still present around him. In contact with men of the world, he will indeed need to return

inside the world from which he has been freed and meet with men who are still slaves to things. During these encounters, he has to remain vigilant, so that he will not be blinded by the things of the sky that are thrown at him and forget the unmediated experience of the sky that he enjoyed in the open-country, beyond the walls of the world. He needs to play with these things rather than to hold on to them, and thereby see these things for what they are and not as what they pretend to be: they are parts of the world, poor images of the sky, which can only be dis-covered outside the boundaries of the world. The avoidance of the danger of the things of the sky can nonetheless become a practice. As told by Master Linji:

日上無雲麗天普照。
 眼中無翳空裏無花。
 “When the sun above has no clouds,
 the bright heavens shine every-where.
 When there is no cataract on the eye,
 there are no [imaginary] flowers in the sky.”³³

Man can know that he is misled by his senses or his world when he sees flowers in the sky, because he knows that they do not belong there. If he is careful, always doubting the truthfulness of the impressions of both his mind and his senses, he will therefore recognize that what he sees are things that are in his eyes rather than in the sky itself. Thus, when he encounters things of the sky within his world, he may know that he should not trust these things, and may show others how they are deceived by their world.

The walls of the world are clouds veiling the light of the way of the sky, preventing it from reaching the eyes of the countless men kept prisoner within them. The “Buddhas,” “gods,” or “spirits” of the world are things whose image is projected in the sky, leading those who have yet to experience what lies beyond the walls of their dwelling to believe that these things belong there. Someone who perceives the falsehood of the world, and the truthfulness of the sky can nonetheless pierce through the deceitful nature of the things

³³ Original Chinese text from: 入矢, 《臨濟錄》, p. 145. English translation from: Linji-yixuan, *The Record of Linji*, p. 33.

of the sky. He can joust with them, playing with those things by letting himself be approached by them, but without letting himself be ensnared and controlled by these fierce opponents, the most skilled among all those found within man's world. Only those who are totally blind to both the nature of the sky itself and to all the images representing it are immune to their dangers, but the fate of these men certainly is the least desirable: blind to any form of celestial light, they are condemned to live in the deepest dungeons of the world, as far from the way as it is possible to be, without hope of liberation or even awareness of their condition.

The man of the way, on the other hand, always has the sky in mind, and its light always serves as a beacon showing him the way, and the way out of the world, when he finds himself venturing back into its dark alleys. When he encounters a thing of the sky within the man-made walls of this world, he neither desires nor fears them. He does not chase them when they are away, nor flees as they draw near him. As a player, servant and son of the sky, he faces them courageously, but without ignoring nor denying the power that they hold over other men and the place of choice that they occupy in the world. What should occur during such encounters is summarized by the following proverb found in the Chan tradition:

逢佛殺佛，
逢祖殺祖。

“Meeting a Buddha, slay the Buddha.
Meeting a patriarch, slay the patriarch.”³⁴

To play with the things of the sky does not imply that this is always done without a show of strength, or without violence, even if this violence is manifested in the world rather than on the earth. The words “Buddha” and “patriarch” both represent things intertwined with the fabric of the sky. In the case of the latter, it is because this man is seen as endowed with an authority derived from the heavens, giving him a place of honor within the world, where his words are seen as flowing down from above and his actions as guided by the way itself. A true son of the sky nonetheless

³⁴ Original Chinese text from: 赤根祥道, 《一分禪》, p. 215. TBA.

逢佛殺佛

knows that the men and things posing as celestial beings that he encounters within the walls of the world are always impostors, frauds that deceive the prisoners who have yet to see the truth of the sky.

Most of these things of the sky were nonetheless not forged with the intention to deceive or lead astray. Their falsehood often comes as a combination of a lack of skill of those who created them, and of the work of the hands of all the men who carried them through the flow of time, altering and deforming them until they lost their resemblance with the truth of the sky. No matter what they were when they were created, they are now forgeries that impair as much as they lead out of the world and into the open-country, where the splendor of the way shines throughout the sky and is readily visible.

Therefore, the son of the sky who already has extracted all that the things of the sky had to offer him, having used the sparks of the celestial light that they contained to find his way out of his worldly prison, can now dispose of what is left of them, as they now are only pitfalls in which he may inadvertently fall. This is why he takes up the sword of reason to deal with these things posing as envoys from the heavens. He brings them down from their high positions, their worldly thrones upon which they stand, above all the other things of the world, and he humiliates them in front of all those who worship them, creating horror and stupefaction among the loyal subjects of these things. With the fire of determination burning like a star inside his heart, he cuts them away piece by piece, slashing through them relentlessly and thereby exposing their true nature to those who witness this massacre of the "holy ones." As a guardian of the purity and integrity of his father's realm, the son of the sky kills all the fake representatives of the sky who roam through the alleys of the world, until none is left and the prisoners within the walls have no idols to worship, but only the guiding hands of the sons of the sky, who lead them out of bondage and beyond the walls, where they can behold the glory of the sky, of which they are fully part.

The humiliation or killing of the Buddhas, patriarchs, gods, or spirits populating the world of men is nonetheless always temporary. They will always be brought to life again by those among the prisoners who are too attached to their chains to let them go.

The beings made by the hands of men to represent the majesty of the sky are unceasingly being resurrected and strengthened by those who worship them or who mistakenly see in them the truth of the sky rather than their own reflection and projections. The joust, the playful combat between the sons of the sky and the impostors misrepresenting their father's realm will never end, until the world is deserted and left as a ruin scattered across the face of the earth.

The life of a son of the sky, a man of the way, is therefore one of perpetual wandering, across both the world and the open-country, the place where he can be himself and where he can forget his self to be one with the whole of the sky, letting himself be carried by the flow of nature across time and space. Never settling anywhere, either on the earth or in the world, he embodies the ever-changing flow that runs under the guidance of the way. In the world, in particular, he stays alert to the numerous pits found on his path, and he is wary of the idols and spirits haunting this place because their falsehood does not imply that they are without power over men. He therefore keeps the following advice found in the *Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (景德傳燈錄):

有佛處不得住。。。無佛處急走過。

“If you see a place where there is Buddha,
do not linger there . . .

If you see a place where there is no Buddha,
pass it quickly.”³⁵

The strangeness or paradoxical aspect of this advice is only apparent. It represents a lesson concerning the nature of the things of the sky in general, and the teaching of a technique allowing one to play with these things.

To see things of the sky in a particular place implies that one is blind to the true nature of the sky itself. To locate something at a precise place in time and space means that this place stands in contrast with others, where this thing cannot be found. The sky, however, is not only found above the earth and the world, as the

³⁵ Original Chinese text from: 赤根祥道, 《一分禪》, p. 229 (Secondary quote from the Record of the Transmission of the Lamp, book 27). TBA.

blue dome that dominates the other realms during the day or the dark celestial vault pierced with thousands of holes from which the light of the way slips through to reach the eyes of men during the night. The sky pervades all: it is the space occupied by the earth and by life; it is the time through which the creation ineluctably advances. It is being itself, what encompasses all that man knows or can imagine.

Therefore, if a man encounters a thing of the sky and sees the sky in it, it means that he is blind to the celestial nature of the other things found around him, including himself. He should therefore refrain from lingering in such a place, which may appear “holy” to him, that is, closer to the heavens than others, but this illusory sanctity is only a distorted reflection that blinds him to the real source of light.

In the same manner, if he sees a place in which the sky cannot be seen, this also implies that he is blind to the true nature of the sky. If the sky cannot be seen in something, it would indeed mean that the sky does not pervade the whole of nature, and that it does not encompass the whole of the creation. To recognize the darkness, one needs to know the light. The witnessing of a presence at a particular, definite place in time and space implies that there are other places where this thing is absent. To see the sky in a particular thing would mean that the sky would not be visible or present in others. To see a particular place where the sky would not be visible would mean that it would be visible somewhere else. Both cases are actually similar: they represent a denial of the essence of the sky, which is to pervade all that *is*, and which represents *being* itself, the whole of all that *is*.

Contrary to appearances, there is no paradox in the advice of the master, as the two situations that it describes are one and the same: the underlying state of mind of someone who sees the sky as a thing like a “Buddha” is the same as the one of someone who fails to see it in a particular place. Therefore, the recommendation is the same in both cases: he should not linger in such a place, and pass it quickly, continuing his walk on the path.

One may then wonder: what should a son of the sky see, if it is neither the presence nor the absence of the sky in a particular place or thing? The key is here the word “particular.” A man of the way, someone who sees the sky for what it is rather than mere

images of it that stand in the sanctuaries of the world, will not see the sky in any particular place, because to locate it means that he would transform it into a definite thing, something with boundaries that would contradict the very nature of the sky. The sky pervades the whole of all that *is*, and he therefore sees it equally everywhere. Present nowhere in particular, it is also never absent from anywhere. There is no sacred place, nor any secular one. There is no opposition between earth and sky, man on one hand and Buddhas, gods, or spirits on the other, because the mere fact that one *is* implies an equal share of celestial nature. There is no need to look up toward the heavenly bodies to find an answer to the question of one's own nature, as each thing that *is* is the sky itself.

Away from all particular things or places, away from the world, the son of the sky may finally be himself. Stumbling upon remnants of the world, he plays with them briefly and then continues on his way, never lingering anywhere for too long, as the things of the earth, those of the world, or those of the sky are always eager to ensnare him and lead him back to the prison from which he escaped. Fleeing certainties, abhorring truths, he spends his days roaming the open-country, never settling anywhere, always simply passing through. He can thus remain free from the yoke of things and enjoy a fellowship with the whole of the sky itself, thereby staying true to his own nature. Aware of the fact that his own self represents a small bump on the way, that he is himself a protuberance that stands out of the perfection of the flow of nature, even if it has been reduced as much as possible, he will welcome the extinction of his own life, the complete release of his self, as he knows that the whole of which he is part will remain, eternal and unchanging. Until then, he will continue to play with the things that threaten his fellowship with the sky, content with the modest part that he plays in the great play of the creation.

Conclusion

The first part of the title of the present work is meant to represent the destination of the journey that is proposed to the reader: the sky beyond the wall. This journey is not the reading of this book, or its understanding. The book itself is only an exploration of the Chinese philosophical tradition, but one that is organized as a roadmap, aimed to guide those who are ready to follow it so that they would be able to peer beyond the walls of the world in which they are kept in chains, often as oblivious of their own condition as they are blind to the nature of the earth and the sky that lie beyond it, and finally gain their freedom from the yoke of the things to which they are attached. The reading of this interpretation of a part of the Chinese philosophical tradition will be vain if it remains a purely intellectual, worldly exploration. More than this, it would not only be useless, but would also represent one more stone for the edification of a world that veils the face of the sky for all its inhabitants.

A roadmap is useless to someone who refuses to depart from his home, either unwilling to abandon its security and comfort or afraid of what life in the open-country would be. Each one of the three parts of the present work represents a milestone on the initiatic journey away from the world and toward a discovery of the truth of the earth and the sky, one that will never end. It begins with a liberation from the weakest chains: the things of the earth, the material objects that man possesses and that end up possessing him. Abandoning the superfluous things to focus on what is essential, one will then have to learn how to play with what remains, instead of grasping. Progressively developing a more detached relationship with the parts of the earth that man needs in order for his life to continue until an appropriate, natural

death comes, that is, food, shelter, or clothes, for example, he is not afraid of lacking or of seeing what he needs in the hands of others. The earth then becomes a friend, a partner with whom he can play, rather than a force of nature holding power over him and keeping him as a dog locked inside a kennel.

The second part of the journey is far trickier than the first. It involves a liberation from the chains of the world, which is more difficult for a very simple reason: most men are completely unaware of their presence. As most men spend their whole life in this pleasant prison, they have no other point of reference, outside of this world, which could allow them to see how limited their freedom is, and how distorted is the image of the earth and the sky that it offers them. To walk this part of the path demands not only determination, as it was mostly the case with the liberation from the yoke of the things of the earth, but also a certain shrewdness and an ability to "think outside the box." Persistent questioning of the foundations of the world, not as the result of a nihilistic or childish will for destruction but rather as a way to expose its falsehood, has to become a daily practice in order to begin to free oneself from the things of the world, without abandoning or rejecting them. Man indeed will always need the world and certain of its things, almost as much as he will need air and water, as it is this world that allows him to be conscious of himself and of the creation around him. Free from the world, he can then become friendly with it, playing with the things that it contains rather than letting himself be controlled by them.

The third and last part of the journey is somewhat less intellectually demanding, but no less difficult for those among the men of the world who have decided to follow the path, that is, those who can be named, in lack of a better word, "spiritual men." Contrary to the chains binding man to the things of the world, those associated with the things of the sky are easily seen. The difficulty to liberate oneself from them does not lie in the strength of the chains themselves, but rather in the fact that they feel so good to the one carrying them that most of the men having undertaken the journey will be unwilling to take them off, convinced that they reveal the nature of the sky to them rather than veil it. Letting themselves be possessed by various things of the sky, they nonetheless fail to encounter the sky itself and to see its course, which is the way of the sky. To let go nevertheless differs from

rejecting, and only the first is required in order to find the way out of the walls. The things of the sky can illuminate the mind of man and pave the way toward the open-country, what lies beyond the wall, where earth and sky can be contemplated in their entirety and where man can let himself be carried by the flow of nature, but only if one is not too attached to them. The first Chinese philosophers of the way did not seem very attached to precise things of the sky, perhaps because of a lack of strong and rigid religious tradition at that time, but this was not the case of many followers of the Chan tradition that came after them. Descriptions of this last step, liberation from the yoke of the things of the sky, can be found at the very beginning of the Chan tradition, but many of its followers have been attached to Buddhist doctrines and the concept of Buddha, a thing of the sky itself, in the same way that men grow attached and are possessed by the things of the earth and those of the world, even sometimes leading to physical violence between the followers of different sects. This attachment to particular things of the sky, products of man's world, prevents them from attaining complete liberation and from experiencing the sky directly, without a mediation that may corrupt or impair this experience. This shows how steep is the last stretch of the path, and that few are those who find the way out of the walls.

As a thing of the world, the present book should also be released once the way out of the walls has been seen, as one can let go of a fishing rod once the fish has been caught. The exploration of the Chinese philosophy of letting go should precede a letting go of philosophy, which may then be played with rather than sought. The release of all things is not the end of man's life, his destination, but rather the beginning of a new life, one lived in accordance with the way of the sky. The man of the world is like a caterpillar, a creature of the earth and the world, crawling in search of scraps offered by the earth. When a man begins his walk on the path leading out of the walls, he is like a caterpillar inside its chrysalis, having begun a radical transformation, not only of his way of life, but of his own being. Finally, those who have succeeded in finding the way out are the sons of the sky, like the butterflies that emerge out of the chrysalides, abandoning the earth to become creatures of the heavens. The sons of the sky can then see the illusory dimension of their journey: the fact that the sky isn't beyond the walls, but that it pervades all, and *is* all, even

if one needs to go out of these walls to realize this. The title of the present work is therefore itself a skillful means that should be released, as it only is useful for those who have yet to experience the truth of the sky.

The end of the yoke of things nonetheless does not imply an eternal and permanent state of bliss. On the contrary, the biggest trial may be the one that is found beyond the walls, away from the world, far from the secure dwelling that has been his home. Just as the hardness of the earth and its gravitational pull give man a stable ground upon which he can move easily and build enduring structures, the things that are part of his life serve as points of reference to which he can hang on when he feels insecure. His whole world is made of things, which occupy his line of sight, his hands, and his mind, always keeping him busy, either learning, accumulating, creating or destroying them, like a child left to play with hundreds of toys that keep him sufficiently occupied for him to stay quiet and not feel bored and distraught. Such behavior is nonetheless not restricted to children: adults will often keep themselves busy during most of their time, preferring exhausting physical labor or mind-numbing tasks to the confrontation with what appears when one has nothing to do: nothingness itself. Most men indeed fear the absence of things, the great void, more than the slavery to things.

The Chan tradition tells us that “no-thing” is better than any good thing (好事不如無), but few will realize this. Most are troubled when they find themselves in places that are deserted, so they live near each other, forming cities that never sleep and from which the darkness are kept away. They become anxious when only silence is heard within their home, so they switch on a television or radio as a background noise that chases the silence away and gives them a sense of security. Such a feeling, experienced by all men, shows that man instinctually fears the absence of things, the moments when he is given a glimpse of what may lie beyond the walls of his home. Someone who undertakes the journey of liberation from the yoke of things will be confronted with such a feeling, but considerably amplified, as he will have to release the totality of the things that are part of his life. To cut off all the bonds that kept him a slave to things implies complete freedom, and therefore also complete insecurity, an absence of points of reference that will represent a difficult trial of his fortitude.

A man who does not possess any thing of the earth either needs to put all his trust in the providence for his survival or not care for his own life, otherwise he will constantly live in fear and restlessness. A man who does not possess anything of the world is a man who is certain of nothing, someone who has no rigid mental frame of reference through which he can make sense of the creation. His vision of the universe is constantly changing and evolving according to the guidance offered by his senses. Each one of the elements forming his world has fuzzy boundaries, and none of them is guaranteed to permanently remain there. Such impermanence and absence of long-lasting structures are also sources of uneasiness, as man can then be sure of nothing. His house of stone is turned into a house made of hay, easily blown by the winds, work of the sky. To be at-ease without the illusory comfort of the walls of his prison will demand courage. Finally, a man who does not possess any thing of the sky is someone who has to face the greatest emptiness of all: the great abyss, that is, the sky itself. Without attachment to any precise thing of the sky, there is no easy, already-determined apparent order of the universe. Without "gods," "buddhas," "spirits," or "cycle of reincarnation," man has to face a spiritual emptiness, an ignorance of the origin, purpose, and end of being itself. The anguish resulting from the absence of understanding of the purpose and essence of being may plunge the "spiritual man" into the deepest sorrow, and lead him to create the order he would like to see in the sky, by shaping things of the sky inside his world, but thereby only veiling the truth he can experience with his senses with caricatures or falsehood.

To face the abyss, to embrace the absence of things, is the final step in man's journey of liberation. It is when the abyss is craved rather than feared; when the absence feels more comforting than any presence, that man becomes a true son of the sky, a man of the way, living in accordance with the flow of nature. Then silence becomes sweeter to the ears as the most skillful composition. Blindness, coming either from light or darkness, then becomes more beautiful as any wonder of nature. Poverty becomes a treasure, and ignorance a blessing. Only an empty space can be filled, and only a man who does not possess anything can receive the whole as a *present*. To embrace the abyss indeed means to embrace the whole of the creation, the only thing that is left when all that man possessed or could possess has been released.

The whole of the sky is the only thing whose possession is without danger, and the only thing that may possess him without harm, as the progress of someone who has already reached his destination cannot be impaired.

Out of the walls that prevented him from beholding the sky itself, without the mediation of the world, man's ego is alone facing the whole of the creation. Not attached to other things, it is greatly deflated compared to what it was before. It nonetheless still represents something that stands out of the rest of the sky, a minuscule turbulence in the flow of nature, but the man living in the open-country is in the best position imaginable to live in harmony with this flow. Such a life as only one guiding principle: do not oppose nature (不違逆自然). This nonetheless poses one problem: it implies that man needs to know nature, to recognize its signs and to see its order. Man is not simply called to deny his own humanity and to become like the other animals, ruled by their instincts and letting themselves be carried by the flow of nature, unaware of their place in it. Man's world may have evolved and been perverted into something that prevents him from living in harmony with the course of the sky, but man's intellectual abilities, his capacity to build and dwell in a world that allows him to make sense of what he experiences, is also a tool that he can use to discover the essence of being itself, to explore the nature of the course of the sky, the way.

No matter whether he is a slave to things or free and roaming in the open-country, man is condemned to live a life anchored in *presence*, that is, to experience the flow of nature with a very limited horizon: a continuity of instantaneous moments from the point of view of a particular region of space, a seamless series of "here and now." This presence therefore implies that he cannot experience the way that guides the course of the sky, but can only infer its existence or imagine its nature. Man's unique abilities, as builder and dweller of the world, endowed with a consciousness, language, and reason, nonetheless offer him a chance to transcend the horizon of his sensory experiences. Building on top of the work of previous generations, who accumulated their own knowledge of nature, fruit of their own contacts with it, he can expand his field of vision of the earth and the sky. The digging of the depths of the earth can reveal clues of the evolution of life, up to billions of years ago, when the earth was still young. The very history of the

earth and the sky can be inferred from the conflation of what can be experienced now with the traces left by the flow of nature upon the earth and the sky as they can be seen here and now. The use of the world to better know nature can be a dangerous weapon: it can lead man to become a slave to his own pursuit of knowledge, of things of the world, thereby forgetting the experience of the sky that his senses offer him, no matter how limited it is, but if man is careful not to be possessed by what he builds or discovers, it may lead him to a deeper experience of the sky, as the horizon of his sensory experience may then be expanded by his worldly knowledge of what lays beyond this horizon: the whole of the sky, beyond *presence*, as a totality that englobes the past and the future, that is, the way itself.

The son of the sky may therefore benefit from a temporary return to the world, a homecoming after a time of communion with the earth and the sky in the open-country. Once he knows the way out, and is at all times careful to play with the things he encounters rather than grasp or possess them, he may then become a visitor to the world without being in danger of falling prey to the yoke of things. To be free from things, no matter whether they belong to the earth, the world, or the sky, therefore does not imply that one would need to stay away from them. They may serve the purpose of a greater harmony between man and the flow of nature. The journey of the man of the way therefore never ends: he spends the years of his life going back and forth between what lies within the walls, where he can make sense of nature beyond the *presence* of his experience, and the open-country that is found beyond them, where he can experience the *presence* of the sky directly. The end of the exploration of the order of nature through the lens of the Chinese tradition presented in this book should thus be seen as an invitation to venture beyond the walls and to complete this worldly excursion with a personal experience of the truth of the sky.

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